

'We are Muslims Too':

The Politics of Identity, Practice, and Discourse among British Progressive Muslims

by

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Transliteration

This thesis will use the latest 2012 American Library Association and the Library of Congress (ALA-LC) Romanization table and transliteration scheme from Arabic. The main transliteration table is given below, while the detailed rules for transliteration can be viewed in the Arabic romanization scheme document produced by the ALA-LC and available online in the Library of Congress's website (ALA-LC 2012).

Letter	Name	ALA-LC Transliteration	
ء	Hamzah	’	
ا	Alif	’; A	’; a
آ	alif maddah	Ā	ā
ى	Alif maqṣūrah	Á	á
ال	alif lām	Al-	al-
ب	bā’	B	b
ت	tā’	T	t
ث	thā’	Th	th
ج	jīm	J	j
ح	ḥā’	Ḥ	ḥ
خ	khā’	Kh	kh
د	Dāl	D	d
ذ	dhāl	Dh	dh

ر	rā’	R	r
ز	zāy	Z	z
س	sīn	S	s
ش	shīn	Sh	sh
ص	ṣuād	Ṣ	ṣ
ض	ḍuād	Ḍ	ḍ
ط	ṭā’	Ṭ	ṭ
ظ	ẓā’	Ẓ	ẓ
ع	‘ayn	‘	
غ	ghayn	Gh	gh
ف	fā’	F	f
ق	qāf	Q	q
ك	kāf	K	k
ل	lām	L	l
م	mīm	M	m
ن	nūn	N	n
ه	hā’	H	h
و	wāw	W; Ū	w; ū
ي	yā’	Y; Ī	y; ī

Glossary

These entries are transliterated and organized in English alphabetical order with *ʻayn* and *hamza* discounted as orthographic elements. Although there are no capital letters in Arabic and Persian, proper names have been capitalized below. All terms are originally from Arabic unless otherwise indicated. Some terms commonly used in the English language press, such as *ḥijāb*, *jihād*, *Sunni*, *Shīʻi*, etc., may not carry diacritical marks and/or be italicised in the text though they have been transliterated below.

***ʻadālah*—**Justice, especially distributive justice.

***adab*—**Etiquette; good manners; proper conduct.

***adhān*—**Muslim call to prayers.

***akhbār-i āhād*— *Ḥadīth* with the chain of narration having as few as a single or solitary narrator in one layer of transmitters, thereby considered potentially less reliable than a *Mutawātir ḥadīth* (see below).

***akhlāq*—**Ethics; Morals; Practice of Virtue.

***al-imāma al-kubrá*—**The ʻgreaterʼ leadership referring to political leadership.

***al-imāma al-ṣughrá*—**The ʻsmallerʼ leadership referring to prayer leadership.

***amāma*—**The one who is in front. Prayer leadership. Political leadership.

***ʻaqīdah*—**Articles of faith; creed; dogma.

***ʻaql*—**Intellect; reason; mind.

***Arbaʻīn*—**A Shīʻi religious observation that occurs forty days after the day of *Ashura* (The

day Husayn was martyred).

***asbāb ul nuzūl*—**The socio-historical context or circumstances of a verse of the Qur'an.

***'Āshūrā'*—**Tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram. It is an important day in the Shī'i religious calendar as they mourn the death of the third imam, Husayn ibn Ali.

asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā—'Allah's Beautiful Names' or the 99 names used to refer to Allah in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

***aṣ-sirāt al-mustaqīm*—**The 'straight path', i.e., living in a way that pleases Allah.

***'awrah*—**The parts of the body that must be covered by clothing except in front of spouses. Intimate body parts.

***bid'ah*—**Innovation in religion that are considered a deviation and a sin by many Muslims.

***bi-lā kayf*—**Qur'anic exegesis that accepts the literal meaning of the text without asking how or why.

bismillāh—'In the name of Allah'. Important phrase used before starting good deeds, prayers, chapters of the Qur'ān and most daily actions.

***bulūgh*—**Age of consent or maturity when an individual becomes responsible for legal and religious duties.

***dār*—**House, household, neighbourhood, or village.

***dār al-iftả*—**A legal advisory and/or research organisation issuing *fatāwá* or legal opinions.

One of the oldest and influential ones in Sunni Islam is the one in Egypt.

***dhikr*—**Repeating the names of Allah in a rhythmical manner as a devotional spiritual practice.

***du'ā'*—**Personal prayer or supplication practised in addition to the formal prayers *(ṣalāh).*

***faḍīlah*—**Piety; virtue; high rank.

***fanāʾ*—**A state of ego-death and merging with the Divine essence of God.

***farḍ*—**A religious obligation. Neglecting is considered grounds for punishment in the hereafter.

***fatwá* (pl. *fatāwá*) —**A legal opinion offered by a religious scholar.

***fiqh*—**Islamic jurisprudence.

***fitnah*—**civil disorder, strife, and anomie.

***fuqahā*—**Scholars who are specialists in Islamic laws and jurisprudence.

***ghayr maḥram*—**A person one has to observe modesty requirements in front of, especially applicable to Muslim women's dress, conduct, and travel. These are people who one can potentially marry.

***ḥadīth*—**The recorded sayings or actions of Prophet Muhammad.

***ḥāl*—**Spiritual states of mind considered gifts of God that motivate a *Ṣūfī* to continue their journey towards God.

***ḥalāl*—**Lawful and permitted according to Islamic jurisprudence. Often refers to food.

***ḥalaqah*—**A gathering to learn about Islam.

***Ḥanafīh*—**It is the oldest of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence. It has the largest number of adherents and recognises juristic preference and opinion as a source of law.

***Ḥanbalī*—**It is the smallest of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence. It does not accept juristic preference, reasoned opinions, and custom as sources of law.

***ḥaqq*—**One of the 99 names of God; Truth; Reality.

***ḥarām*—**Forbidden or sinful.

***ḥasab*—**Social rank, status, and nobility.

***ḥawzah*—**A seminary where Shī‘i Muslims are educated and trained.

***ḥijāb*—**Article of clothing used to cover Muslim women’s hair and/or neck, shoulders, and chest.

***ḥukamah*—**Rulings based on the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*. The hermeneutical engagements of Islamic philosophers, scholars, and jurists.

***‘ibādah*—**Ritual worship and other expressions of submission to Allah.

***iftar*—**The meal eaten after sunset that breaks the fast during the month of Ramadan.

***ijmā‘*—**One of the bases of Islamic law referring to the consensus of religious scholars or the Muslim community.

***ijtihād*—**Independent and new legal and religious interpretations.

***‘illa*—**Reasoning, purpose, explanation, operating cause behind a ruling.

***‘ilm*—**Knowledge; Science.

***‘ilm asma’ al-rijāl*—**The knowledge of the reliability and biographies of the narrators in the chains of transmission.

***‘ilm ul dirāyā*—**Knowledge of what is seen and knowable, i.e., of the material world.

***imām*—**Leader; prayer leader; political leader; in Twelver Shī‘i tradition it is a title for the twelve sacred successors of Muhammad.

***imāma*—**Leadership**.**

***iqāmah*—**The second call to prayer immediately before prayer begins.

***‘ishā’*—**The fifth daily prayers of the day performed at night.

***‘iṣmah*—**Moral infallibility, incorruptibility. A characteristic of prophets, angels, and—for Shī‘i—the twelve imams.

***isnād*—**The chain of transmitters for a *ḥadīth*.

***istiḥsan*—**Juristic discretion, preferences, or opinions in choosing an Islamic law from other potential possibilities.

***Jaʿfarī*—** The main contemporary school of Shī‘i jurisprudence. It differs from the main Sunni schools in its reliance on *ijtihād* and the *ḥadīth* compilations and sources it uses.

***jānamāz*—** Literally in Persian: place of prayer**.** Used for prayer rug or mat.

Jihād—Struggle or striving in the way of God can be considered an internal struggle or a

political one. It can also be used to describe defensive or offensive military campaigns.

***jilbab*—**A long, flowing, baggy garment worn by women to fulfil religious modesty requirements.

***Jum'ah*—**Friday or Friday communal prayers.

***kalām*—**The discipline of Islamic philosophy and theology.

***kashf*—**Knowledge of the 'heart' rather than the intellect. In *Ṣūfī* tradition it refers to phenomenological, personal, experiential knowledge or gnosis over that based on textual, empirical, or rational endeavours.

***khaṭīb*—**The person giving a sermon during communal prayers.

***khuṭbah*—**The sermon and recitation during communal prayers.

***mā'nā*—**Semantics, linguistic meaning in hermeneutics of the Qur'an.

***madhhab*—**School of Islamic jurisprudence.

***Maghrib*—**The fourth or evening daily prayers.

Malāmatiyah (Malāmati)— *Malāmatiyah* refers to the ideas and practices tracing back to Persian Muslim mystics in the ninth century called the *Malāmatiyah* known for a lack of external display of piety, non-conformity to social norms of piety, and acceptance of social blame for a lack of proper conduct as a path to the cultivation of an ethical subjectivity.

***Mālikī*—**One of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence that includes the customs of the people of Medina in the first few generations after Muhammad.

***manhaj*—**The methodology for reaching 'truth' or knowledge claims.

***maqāṣid*—**Goals or purpose such as the purpose of Islamic law.

***maʿrifa*—**Mystical phenomenological knowledge and awareness.

***mashrabiyya*—**A wooden screen to protect privacy. An architectural structure for shade and cooling.

***maṣlaḥah*—**Public interest or welfare.

***matn*—**The content of *ḥadīth* in contrast to its chain of narrators.

***mawḍūʿi*—**Thematic and holistic method of Qur'anic exegesis.

***miḥna*—**Period of religious persecution by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun of anyone opposing the *Muʿtazilah* doctrine.

***miḥrāb*—**a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of prayers.

***minbar*—**The raised pulpit in a mosque from where the sermon is delivered.

***misbaḥah*—**Prayer beads used for repetitive recitation or *dhikr*.

***mu'adhin*—**The person who performs the call to prayers.

***muʿāmalāt*—**The part of Islamic jurisprudence dealing with commercial and civil matters. More broadly, all *fiqh* that does not relate to acts of worship (*'ibādah*).

***mujtahid*—**A scholar who employs reason to formulate an opinion or a legal ruling on a religious issue.

***murtad*—**Apostate.

***muṣallá*—**A temporary space, usually outside the mosque, used for prayer. It can also be an indoor prayer space that is not considered a mosque by congregants.

***mutawātir*—**The *ḥadīth* that are considered beyond doubt due to being narrated by a large number of reliable witnesses and transmitted through different narration chains.

***Muʿtazilah*—**An extinct school of Islamic theology that flourished in Basra and Baghdad between 8th-10th century and stressed God's oneness and justice as well as humanity's free will and reason.

***nafl*—**Optional or supererogatory prayers in contrast to the mandatory ones.

***nafs*—**Soul; Ego/mind/id/lower self/bodily drives and instincts.

***nasab*—**Genealogy or lineage.

***naskh*—**Abrogation.

***naskh wa mansūkh*—**The doctrine that certain parts of the Qur'ān abrogate other parts.

***nikāḥ*—**Matrimonial contract that solemnises and legalises an Islamic marriage.

***niyāba 'āmma*—** The doctrine of 'general deputyship' developed by Shī'i legal scholars that claims they serve as representatives in the absence of the Twelfth *imām*.

***niyyah*—**Intention.

***nūr*—**Light; Divine Grace; Divine guidance; holy energy or light.

***qalb*—**The heart; emotions; the centre of the 'self'; intuition; authentic self; love; ethics;

empathy/compassion.

***qaṣd*—**An approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an and jurisprudence that begins with ethical aims and principles.

***qiblah*—**The direction Muslims face during prayers representing the direction of the cube-shaped building (*Kaʿbah*) in Mecca.

***qiyām*—**The standing position during prayers.

***qunūt*—**Literally means 'being obedient' and refers to a *duʻā'* (supplication) recited during prayers and in difficult times.

Qur'ān—The holy book revealed as the literal words of God to Muhammad.

***rakaʻah* (pl. *rukū*) —**One unit or full cycle of Islamic prayers.

***ra'y*—**Reason-based personal opinion of jurists as a source of Islamic law.

***rūḥ*—**The Divine breath of God blown into the clat of Adam; the human soul; spirit.

***saf*—**The straight parallel rows formed by congregants during prayers.

***ṣaḥabāh*—**The companions of Muhammad.

***saḥīḥ*—**The term to describe *ḥadīth* that have trustworthy lineage or *isnād*.

***sajjāda*—**Prayer rug or mat.

***ṣalāh*—**One of the 'pillars of Islam'. The daily five obligatory prayers.

***ṣalāh al-Jumʻah*—**The congregational Friday public prayers.

***samāʿ* (*sema*) —**Spiritual gathering or ceremony of various *Ṣūfī* orders.

***Shāfiʿī*—**One of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Reject personal opinion and juristic discretion.

***sharīʿah*—**The eternal and divinely-mandated ethical and legal code. The basis of Islamic jurisprudence.

***Shaykh*—**An Islamic spiritual master.

***Shīʿi*—**The minority branch of Muslims who believe Imam Ali and his sons to be the rightful custodians and leaders of Muslims by the will of Muhammad.

Sohbet—Literally in Persian**:** company, gathering. Extended to **s**piritual gathering.

***sunnah*—**The example set by Muhammad through actions and teachings as moral example for Muslims. Optional good deeds and voluntary ritual prayers.

***sunni*—**The largest branch of Islam called *Ahl as-sunnah wa l-jamāʿah* or 'the people of the sunnah and the community'.

***sūrah*—**A chapter of the Qur'an.

***tafsīr*—**Commentary on the Qur'an; exegesis.

***taḥqīq*—**Contemplative inquiry or self-reflection.

***takbīr* (*Allāhu Akbar*)—**God is great. Muslim invocation proclaiming the Allah's greatness.

***takhsīs al zamān wal makān*—**A qualification made to a general ruling restricting its

applicability to a specific time and place.

***taqlīd*—**To follow the scholarly legal opinion of one of the main schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

***taqwá*—**Piety; Fear of God; Righteousness.

***tarāwīḥ*—**Extra prayers offered after the night prayers in Ramadan.

***ṭarīqah*—**A *Ṣūfī* order.

***taṣawwuf*—** Ṣūfīsm or Islamic mysticism.

***tasbīḥ*—**The phrase 'Glory be to Allah'. Praising and showing gratitude to God.

***tawḥīd*—**The first pillar of Islam. Monotheism. Affirming the Oneness or unity of God.

***tā'wīl*—**Explanation and interpretation.

***thawāb*—**The reward for good deeds that are tallied in the Day of Judgment.

***turbah*—** clay tablets made of soil from Karbala. Used by Shī'i Muslims to prostrate on during prayers.

***'ulamā'*—**Islamic scholars and experts.

ʾ***ummah*—**The global community of all Muslim believers.

ʾ***uṣūl al-Fiqh*—**The study of the origins, goals, purpose and principles of Islamic jurisprudence.

***waḥy*—**God's revelation to Prophets.

***wuḍū'*—**Ritual purification through ablution performed before prayers or the handling of the Qur'an.

***zauj*—**Spouse**.**

Zaydīyah—A branch of Shī'i Islam, also called Fivers, who believe that the great great-grandson of caliph Ali (Zayd ibn Zayn al-Abidin) was the fifth imam. Currently still existent in Yemen (Houthi).

List of Abbreviations

BAME: Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic

BSA: British Social Attitudes

BSL: British Sign Language

CEMB: Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain

CEOPC :Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre

CSE: Child Sexual Exploitation

EDL: English Defence League

EEGP (London): East End Gay Parade

EMQ: English Meaning (Translation) of the Qur'ān

FBV: Fundamental British Values

FMBM: 'Faith Matters: British Muslims'

IMI: Inclusive Mosque Initiative

ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq & Levant

LADs: Local Authority Districts

LQM: London Queer Muslims

MCB: Muslim Council of Britain

MECO: Muslim Education Centre of Oxford

MPV: Muslims for Progressive Values

NDA: Non-Disclosure Agreement

ONS: Office of National Statistics

OSCT: Security and Counter Terrorism

RSE: Inclusive Relationship and Sex Education

SES: Socioeconomic Status

TPIMs: Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explores organisations in the UK that identify with the label ‘progressive Muslim’. The main organisation it studies is the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI) together with other organisations that offer points of contrast and similarities with the IMI. The thesis describes the key academic and theological principles of contemporary progressive Islam and the ways these are utilised in specific socio-historical contexts. Specifically, it explores through participant observation and interviews the key areas of debate where progressive Muslim theology and principles are applied within the British context: female ritual leadership; LGBTQIA+ rights; Islamophobia and racism; and the counterterrorism and criminal justice systems. The thesis claims that the same theological resources and hermeneutical approaches can lead to contrasting and oppositional political positions and practices, thereby challenging any essentialist understanding of ‘progressive Muslims’ as either pro- or anti- ‘secular’ state actors. Progressive Muslims engage with religious resources in diverse ways and with diverse goals, ranging from rational textual hermeneutics aimed at creating a new orthodoxy to somatic and affective personal mystical experiences aimed at projects of ‘self-care’. Furthermore, they often straddle the boundaries between discourses, practices, and identities that are constructed as ‘incompatible,’ creating unique challenges as well as opportunities for religious and political responses that are unavailable or ineffective for other social actors. The thesis claims that this positionality of progressive Muslims within Western socio-political contexts makes them valuable subjects to interrogate the fault-lines of sensitive public and academic debates on Islamophobia, racism, feminism, queer rights, secularism, religious violence and extremism, and the criminal justice system.

1. Introduction

In a brightly-lit and noisy ballroom in a hotel in London a group of around 40 Muslims had gathered to eat, socialise, and pray together in celebration of the fourth anniversary of their voluntary organisation: The Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI n.d.). When it was time for the *Maghrib* prayer the room got quiet and one of the men stood in the front of the rows of worshippers that were forming and called out the *adhān*. Like many other Muslims offering their prayers at the same time all over the United Kingdom (UK) these Muslims also prepared to face the *Qiblah* and offer their *ṣalāh*, except here some of the traditional rules were not observed as men and women stood side-by-side and some women did not choose to cover their hair while they offered their prayers. The individuals who had joined this organisation and attended such events came from varied backgrounds but most of them identified as practising Muslims. They were part of a loose global network of Muslims who identify as 'progressive Muslim' and seek to practise and propagate Islam based on ethical and theological principles that are often considered 'unorthodox' by the more mainstream Muslim communities.

This thesis is an exploration of one segment of the diverse British Muslim community: the 'progressive' Muslim[1] communities. It aims to provide a descriptive account of some 'progressive' Muslim networks, especially the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI) in the UK. Other such organisations (listed later in this chapter), are also examined to understand how this 'community'[2] helps to highlight and understand the diverse roles played

[1] The way this term is employed, its purpose, and definition follows further ahead in the thesis. I will stop using the inverted commas once I have defined the term for the purpose of this thesis.

[2] I will use the word 'community' as a performative aspirational notion employed in contextually variable and strategic ways by my interlocutors rather than as a distinct social arrangement that is 'out there' or as a coherent analytical tool. I take this approach to the word 'community' from Gerd Baumann's book, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (1996).

by Islam as a discourse and practice in contemporary Muslim minority communities living in Western nation-states.

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1.1. IS THERE A SINGLE ISLAM?

The word ‘Islam’ is often employed in daily use by both Muslims and non-Muslims as if there is a single, unitary monolith neatly emerging from sources that are interpreted in a way that leads to a consensus. This, however, is an idea which is also constantly debated and countered by both Muslims and non-Muslims by pointing to the reality of different Islamic interpretations, practices, and communities but often these counterstatements do not challenge the concept that there is indeed a normative ‘true Islam’ that a believer can aspire towards. The idea that there are multiple valid ‘Islams’ also has currency in Muslim contexts but the parameters of what the boundaries of those multiple ‘Islams’—or more accurately multiple Islamic legal and theological interpretations—is the crux of debates.

Anthropological theories of Islam have engaged with the same questions related to the nature of Islam and how to define and delineate its features, which I will explore below. First, I will describe an example of how this debate played out during my fieldwork and explore its implications with regards to the anthropological theories on Islam.

On 22 May 2017, a suicide bomber detonated a homemade bomb in Manchester during a concert by American pop-star Ariana Grande. Later investigations revealed the identity of the bomber, Salman Ramadan Abedi, a twenty-two-year-old British Muslim man of Libyan ancestry. Immediately, the familiar debates around the compatibility of British Muslim beliefs and practices with 'British culture' appeared in media and public discussions. Within this context, Dr Taj Hargey, an *imām* at the Muslim Education Centre of Oxford (MECO), was contacted by a journalist to comment on the Manchester Arena bombing. The interview was broadcast on public radio and Dr Hargey expounded on the ideological bases of militant Islam. During this interview he critiqued the role of—what he provocatively labelled as 'the toxic trio'— *hadīth*, *sharī'ah*, and *fatāwá* (legal rulings) in furnishing the justifications for militant Islamism.

The next day I attended a meeting at the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI), the main site of my ethnographic research, where some attendees had listened to Dr Hargey's interview and were infuriated by it. Fatima, a twenty-three-year-old Muslim woman from London, expressed that she felt shocked and anxious to hear the interview because 'it feeds into hatred and paranoia about us'. Another attendee added, 'This kind of inflammatory language at a time like this only makes our job harder'. The discussion in this gathering focused on what they believed legitimate and ethical progressive Muslim critique of Islamic

beliefs and practices should look like in the British context. These contestations around the concept of Islam itself are at the heart of this thesis.

By focusing on Progressive Islam in this thesis I refute the perspective that there is a single object called 'Islam' which is commonly employed in both positive as well as negative popular and academic representations of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' (Morey & Yaqin 2011; Shryock 2010). The anthropology of Islam has been tracing the ways that people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, conceptualise both 'Islam' and 'being Muslim' and the essentialist assertion that there is one 'authentic' Islam is an important and common discourse (Launay 1992). This approach is especially important in the current political climate where a number of anti-Muslim populist groups and movements are gaining ground in various Western countries and rely on a rhetoric that treats both 'Islam' and 'being Muslim' as 'essential and unchanging dimensions of the worlds of people of Muslim background'(Marsden & Retsikas 2013: 1). When this fusion of Muslim lifeways and worldviews with 'Islam' is consistent it leads either to a culturalist understanding of Islam that can reduce it to a multitude of local cultural practices or to an individualised understanding that can make Islam anything an individual Muslim says or does.

For instance, El-Zein's (1977) critique of anthropological approaches that assume a truly universal and single Islam focused on the multiplicity of local and historical expressions of Islam but itself became so expansive that it made 'Islam' into something that had no reality in itself and was simply equivalent to 'culture'. He wrote that Islam 'cannot be viewed as an available entity for cultural systems to select and put to various uses. "Islam," without referring it to the facets of a system of which it is part, does not exist' (1977: 252). The issue with the discarding of 'Islam' as an analytical category is that it implies that the observation that most

Muslims conceive of Islam as something universal, despite being aware that they are not all the same in their beliefs and practices, demonstrates a 'false consciousness,' which the analyst, of course, can see through. Further ahead in this chapter, I will pursue the anthropological interventions that attempt to resolve this dilemma and provide a sketch of the theoretical framework I have utilised for analysing my fieldwork experiences in this thesis.

1.2. 'BRITISH ISLAM': DIVERSITY AND UNITY AMONG BRITISH MUSLIMS

As I delved into the anthropological work on British Muslims, I realised that there is a rich body of literature on the qualitative character of a large variety of communities within the broader British Muslim identity. Specifically, there is substantial literature on the adaptive strategies employed by immigrant communities to highlight their differences from each other, as well as to showcase how they have created new worlds by reinterpreting and adapting 'their own particular cultural, religious and linguistic inheritance' (Ballard 1996: 5). Anthropological research has highlighted the diversity in national origin (Küçükcan 1999; Shaw 1996), ethnicity and race (Hoque 2015; Modood 2005), caste (Shaw 1996), sect and ideology (Bowen 2014; Inge 2016), and regional diversity (Alam 2006; Joly 1987) amongst British Muslims.

Thus, while Muslims have been studied in detail, 'progressive' Muslim, as an identity, belief system, movement, community, or religious practice has not received much academic attention in anthropology. Nadia Fadil argues that anthropologists' focus on traditional and orthodox Muslim subjectivities and conduct leaves other forms of Muslim pious and religious conduct unexplored, thereby resulting in an 'embryonic' literature on 'liberal' and 'secular' Muslims (2011: 85). Furthermore, even when anthropologists have studied 'non-orthodox' Muslims the analysis has often focused on non-practising or 'secular' Muslims

that cultivate a moral subjectivity 'primarily structured by liberal ethical grounds' (ibid.: 86). For instance, Fadil explored European Muslim women's practices of 'un-veiling,' not praying in public, nostalgia for the 'traditional Islam' of previous generations, and 'not-fasting' as reproducing and reinforcing secular discourses and power structures despite disrupting the idea of secularism as future-oriented and homogeneous (2009, 2011, 2013, 2017).

Similarly, Mayanthi Fernando argues that secular Muslim women in France are politically efficacious as the tension between their racialised and religious 'difference' and their assimilation into the French secular norm makes them 'ideologically effective' as 'testaments to the universal promise of republican citizenship, and to the failure of their African and Arab brothers and sisters to embrace French/universal values' (2009: 389). On the other hand, this thesis will explore how Progressive Muslim subjectivities, practices, and politics do not necessarily reproduce state and secular discourses and power structures but can be employed variably in different contexts, including those that challenge normative state and secular orders.

An example of such anthropological analysis is Katrina D. Thompson's ethnographic account of Progressive Muslim congregations in North America. While she concurs that anthropology has given 'very little attention to the everyday practices and discourses of "ordinary" Progressive Muslims and the communities in which they take part' (2020a: 878) she challenges essentialist readings of 'secular' Muslims as not serious about religious traditions and focused on reproducing secular individual liberties and politics. Daly critiques such representations as she demonstrated that her interlocutors were actively invested in cultivating new religious subjectivities, interpretations, and communities, not only through

engagement with religious texts but through the practice of rituals. These communities challenged not only other 'orthodox' religious discourses but fundamental assumptions of secularism, like a focus on individualism, privatisation of religion, or reason and rationality as primary modes of self-formation. Her research demonstrated the importance of studying not just the individual beliefs and textual interpretations of progressive Muslims but their communal rituals, like the Friday prayers, as these are key sites where traditions and discourses are reworked through intercorporeal somatic practices (ibid.) Similarly, this thesis will examine both the cognitive beliefs and interpretations as well as the somatic and intercorporeal ritual practices that Progressive Muslims use to cultivate their 'spirituality' and religious group boundaries in the context of 'British Islam'.

Thus, an ethnographic study of Progressive British Muslims can provide an account of a 'community' of Muslim 'minorities within minorities' that has not yet been studied in-depth anthropologically. Furthermore, studying the religious discourses and practices of Progressive Muslims can give us valuable insight into the issues, challenges, opportunities, and changes experienced by British Muslims in general. Progressive Islam provides insights into the discourses and practices emerging at the margins of Muslim communities in the context of broader social changes and pressures faced by minority Muslims in Western contexts. Since these communities and individuals can be considered more 'heretical' or 'creative'—depending on one's perspective—than the more institutionally established Islamic communities in Britain, they demonstrate in a more stark and clear way the processes that Muslims engage with when they utilise Islam as a discursive tradition to shape their subjectivities and broader social structures in diverse and radically different contexts and

times. But before writing about British Islam, I will touch upon the use of 'Islam' as a source of identity in contemporary Britain.

1.2.1. British Muslim History and Identity

While a few Muslims had settled down in Britain from at least the sixteenth century onwards, and some British people converted to Islam during the Victorian age (Geaves 2009), the population of Muslims in the UK only exploded in the later part of the twentieth century. The largest single community of Muslims entering the UK at that time were Kashmiris (from the Jammu and Kashmir region under Pakistani administration), especially workmen from the city of Mirpur. In the fifties they came to secure a better economic future and, in the sixties, because of the displacement caused to their families by the construction of the Mangla Dam. Many Kashmiri Muslims came through a programme supported by the UK government (Werbner 2005).

The pioneering generation of Pakistani Muslims were economic migrants and thought in terms of going back home when their economic future was secure. This 'myth of return', however, has now been abandoned in its original form. Second- and third-generation Pakistani Muslims, however, still form 'homeland attachments', strengthening them by visiting their ancestral villages during holidays, bringing spouses from the home country and, more recently, thinking of returning in response to increasing Islamophobia and political hostility after the 7/7 attacks[3] (Bolognani 2007).

Over the second half of the twentieth century, Bangladeshis (Alexander et al. 2018: 102), Somalis (Liberatore 2017) and other Muslim groups (East African Indians, Turkish

[3] 7/7 refers to the worst single terrorist attack on British soil that occurred on 7 July 2005 in London where 52 people lost their lives and hundreds more were injured. Four British Muslim men were found to have carried out the four coordinated bomb attacks on the day.

Cypriots, Balkan Muslims, and Arabs) were becoming an increasingly large part of the Muslim population in Britain (Bowen 2016: 11). Substantial Arab Muslim communities formed in urban areas like London from the 1960s onwards, arriving mostly as students, professionals, and business owners. Others like the East African South Asian Muslims arrived because they were expelled from Uganda and Kenya in the 1970s. Most other Muslim ethnic communities emerged from a combination of economic migration, refugees, and asylum seeking. For instance, Turkish Cypriot migration to the UK increased due to violent clashes in Cyprus during the 50s and 60s. Similarly, the increase in Somali migrants in the UK also followed the violence in the civil war in Somalia during the 80s and 90s. There has also been an increase in Arab migration to the UK in recent years due to the recent wars in the Middle East, particularly Iraqi and Syrian refugees. The major exclusionary experience of British Muslims is best explained by the concepts of raciality and racialisation which follows.

1.3. RACIALITY AND RACIALISATION

The terms raciality and racialisation refer to 'the social and political processes whereby racially distinct groups are constituted' (Skinner 2006: 460). These social processes attribute meaning to somatic and phenotypical characteristics, as well as to certain socio-cultural practices, in ways that construct differentiated social collectives which are then understood as 'races' (Miles 2002). The term is meant to highlight the dynamic and unstable psychological, economic, and political signifying practices that construct what 'race' means and how racial categories function in any given context and time, as opposed to any ascription of core stable biological bases of 'race' (biological determinism, genetic inheritance, also called 'inherentism'). Racialisation acknowledges both phenomenological and social structural factors involved in 'race' and 'racism'.

Racialisation as a concept also frames racism as always constituted through various other intersecting forms of prejudices, identities, and categorisations, e.g., sexism, nationalism, classism, and so forth (Miles 2002: 87). Robert Miles proposed this intersectional concept of 'racial articulations' to recognise that, despite the value of analytical clarity about the unique nature and content of different forms of prejudices and identities, in social life exclusionary discourses and discriminatory practices are not discrete but tend to share common elements in ways where one form of denigration, hate, or fear for a perceived 'Other' bleeds into another.

For example, scholars have highlighted how in the post-9/11 Euro-Atlantic context religious minority groups, especially Muslims in the West, are increasingly constructed as racialised communities rather than simply another religious group (Meer & Modood 2010; Meer & Noorani 2008; Modood 2005; Razack 2008). Furthermore, racism is increasingly expressed through the language of 'cultural racism' rather than 'biological racism' in contemporary Europe and North America. Cultural racism incorporates previous anti-racist critiques of the essentialist assumptions of biology-based racism by disavowing the terms of 'race' in order to re-legitimise racist practises justified as a critique of dangerous, inferior, and 'absolutely different' cultures, i.e., 'anti-essentialism as a defence of racism' (Bhattacharyya 2008: 97). Furthermore, racialised bodies have never been exclusively viewed as distinctive due to phenotypical features alone but have always been marked at the same time through religion, culture, history, and territories (Sayyid 2010: 13). This type of racial profiling is a feature of the genesis of a new racialised identity category, particularly since 9/11, of the 'potential terrorist' that brings together a diverse collection of people who 'appear Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim', who are then 'interpellated as antithetical to the

citizen's sense of identity' (Volpp 2002: 1594). Thus people and communities come to be viewed as a uniquely threatening 'Other'—representing *another* human race, history, civilisation, and ancestry—due to their actual, or perceived, Islamic faith (Runnymede Trust et al. 2017).

British race studies scholars Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood analyse the language used by Douglas Murray, a British political commentator, and the British novelist Martin Amis, to demonstrate the way religious groups are racialised in Islamophobic rhetoric. For instance, Douglas Murray advocates that 'conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board: Europe must look like a less attractive proposition…Where a person was born in the West, they should be deported to the country of origin of their parent or grandparent' (quoted in Meer & Modood 2010: 69). Martin Amis made comments on public TV on demographics and fertility rates when referring to Islam, making the issue not about religious beliefs and practices, but different ancestral groups seemingly locked in a battle for survival. Amis further demonstrated the racialisation of Islam by advocating 'strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan' (quoted in Meer & Modood 2010: 80). As Meer & Modood write: 'The ethnic cleanser, unlike an Inquisitor, wasted no time in finding out what people believed, if and how often they went to a mosque and so on: their victims were racially identified as Muslims' (2010: 77).

1.3.1. The Salience of Religion as a Marker of Muslim Identity

The experiences of racism and economic marginality were the main concerns of the various British Muslim communities initially, and regionalism, class, and ethnicity were important unifying identities that allowed the formation of political alliances. But with the Rushdie affair of 1989, the Bosnian war (1992-1995), and other salient international affairs— like the

first Chechen war (1994-1996) and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict—there was a heightened awareness of religious identity among British Muslims of different ethnicities, and a renewed sense of political solidarity based on religious identity. Religion, significantly, became the central identity marker to form alliances with other ethnic groups when there was a rise in anti-Muslim bigotry rather than just attacks based on race, national origin, or skin colour (Lewis 1994). This process was heightened significantly due to the increased political and media focus on Islam and Muslims as a distinct racial community, and potentially a threat, within Western democracies after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks.

The development of an ethno-religious 'British Muslim' identity[4] as the salient identity for individuals from a Muslim background is an on-going process with varying levels of influence in different segments of Muslim communities. For instance, religious identity is more salient as a primary identifier for younger Muslims than the older generations who are more likely to place ethnic or national-origin as the primary social identifier (Janmohamed 2016). Similarly, it is more common in Muslims from professional backgrounds and those living in mixed, diverse, urban areas like London than those who live in more homogeneous Muslim communities like those in Bradford. Furthermore, there are ethnic differences in the level of the salience of religious identity, with higher levels within South Asian Muslims compared to Iranian Muslims in Britain (Gholami 2015).

[4] This developing ethno-religious identity of 'British Muslim' is similar to but not as developed or historically coherent as the category of 'Jewish', which denotes not just religious identity but a historically continuous cultural and ethnic identity that is not necessarily tied to religious faith or observance (Lazerwitz 1973). Hence, it is not unusual to have people who consider being 'Jewish' as their primary identity but are atheists, agnostic, 'cultural Jews', or even having Christian or some other religious faith (Horowitz 2000). In fact, in a recent Pew survey the majority of American Jews (62%) believe that identifying as Jewish is primarily a matter of ethnic and cultural identity rather than a religious identity or a statement of religious faith (Pew Research Center 2013: 8).

This development of 'British Muslim' as a politically and socially recognised ethno-religious identity is relevant for this study because although the organisations and individuals dealt with here come from diverse national, economic, and ethnic backgrounds they participate in civil society primarily as members of the 'British-Muslim' community rather than as members of any ethnic, national, linguistic, socio-economic, or regional community. In contemporary Britain there are numerous organisations that claim to represent 'British Muslims' (O'Toole et al. 2013; Pedziwiatr 2007; Phillips 2008), as well as events that bring people together and recognise their achievements based on their religious identification like the 'British Muslim Awards' (Oceanic 2016) or 'Muslim News Awards' (TMN n.d.), and media, fashion, and consumer culture specifically directed to individuals based on their identity as 'Muslim' (Janmohamed 2016; Tarlo 2010).

As part of my fieldwork, I volunteered at the Muslim News Awards ceremony held at a posh hotel in central London in March 2017. The audience was ethnically diverse as well as visibly diverse, in terms of visible religious expression and presentation, although in terms of class they appeared to be primarily middle-class educated professionals. The awards were given to both men and women for secular as well as religious achievements with the common theme of advancing the visibility and status of Muslims in the British public sphere. The awardees made political statements criticising Islamophobic political discourses and laws in the UK as well as focusing on the racism and Islamophobia in Trump's rhetoric and policies. Interestingly, even the more visibly religious awardees and attendees did not speak much about theology or Islamic rituals but focused on the need to present a unified and diverse public image of British Muslims and a few included statements specifically related to women taking more active roles in all aspects of Muslim lives and inclusive comments on

queer Muslims. There was a prayer break which was led in the Shī'i tradition with Muslims of from other sects and affiliations variably following the lead of the *imām*, praying according to their affiliations, or choosing not to join the congregation. The event is an example of the way 'being Muslim' in the British context often functions as an ethno-religious identity that does not refer necessarily to specific beliefs, practices, or politics but forms a central aspect of people's identity and social connection and belonging.

Furthermore, religious background and heritage as the salient feature of defining identity and *the* tool used for community building and self-advocacy has not only been recognised by the British state and media but actively facilitated by public policy and political discourses. British Muslims have increasingly been considered a distinct community with their own defined and shared interests that need to be represented by organisations and individuals that come from that community. Hence, the state has invested in recognising and consulting with organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)[5] when it comes to issues that relate to British Muslims regardless of ethnicity, national origin, or socio-economic class. The identity of 'British Muslim' shares some similarities with other communities that define themselves primarily through a religious identity without necessarily implying religious belief or religiosity, such as the category of 'Muslim by ethnicity' in the Balkans. (Bringa 1995; Friedman 1996; Pulton & Taji-Farouki 1997).

Similarly, media and popular discourses highlight the religious identity of individuals who have a Muslim heritage more than other potential identity markers (ethnic, racial, linguistic, national origin, or socio-economic). For instance, the discourses on politicians

[5] Muslim Council of Britain is a national umbrella organisation for over 500 Muslim organisations in the UK. Its work focuses on 'empowering Muslim communities towards achieving a just, cohesive, and successful British society' (Muslim Council of Britain - MCB n.d.).

from a Muslim heritage, like Sadiq Khan, Sajid Javed, or Baroness Syeda Warsi, choose the Muslim identity as the identity that is most salient and relevant for understanding their communal belonging, representation, and loyalties. The same is true for other individuals who are of Muslim heritage in different fields, whether it is the winner of the Great British Bake-off Nadiya Husain, actor Riz Ahmed, Olympic Gold medallist runner Mo Farah, or the champion boxer Amir Khan. For instance, the media often reported the election of Sadiq Khan as the mayor of London as making him the 'first Muslim mayor' of the city and one of the most prominent Muslim politicians in the West (Castle 2016). The way cultural discourses within Britain construct religion as a salient identity for individuals from a Muslim background can also be seen through the way Sadiq Khan's political opponent in the mayoral election, Zac Goldsmith, grasped on Khan's Muslim identity as an election issue rather than focus on other identity markers that carry a potentially more costly political baggage, like national origin or race.

Within this context, the critique emerging from Islamic feminism challenging certain aspects of Islamic discourses and institutions that are currently normative can be, and has been, co-opted to furnish justifications for socio-political marginalisation and stigmatisation of Muslims in general (Abu-Lughod 2013). Additionally, there are disparate views and perceptions—both within Muslims and between Muslims and other groups—about what constitutes a legitimate critique of Islamic or Muslim beliefs or practices, and how this may be distinguished from the extant racist and anti-Muslim (Islamophobic) discourses (Mamdani 2002).

1.3.2. The Demographics of British Muslims

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for planning and running the census in England and Wales every ten years, while the National Records of Scotland and Northern

Ireland Statistics and Research Agency run the census for Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively. According to the 2011 census, Muslims formed 4.9% of the population of England and Wales, which was the largest non-Christian religiously-defined demographic group in these countries. The latest census conducted in 2021 shows an increase in the number of people who describe themselves as 'Muslim' reaching 6.5% of the population of England and Wales (ONS 2022: 3) .

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) analysed the data from the census conducted in 2011 in the UK to produce a report on the demographics of British Muslims (Ali & Muslim Council of Britain 2015). Religious affiliation was only added as a data point to the census from 2001 after sustained effort by an alliance of faith groups, including MCB, and advocacy by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The question on religion is still voluntary but over 92% of respondents answered it (2015: 8). British Muslims are an ethnically diverse group with almost 1 in 3 Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) [6] individuals in the UK identifying as Muslim; just less than half are UK-born (47.2%). The largest British Muslim ethnic group is Pakistanis/Kashmiris, followed by Bangladeshis, and then Indians. There is also a substantial and increasing community of Black Africans, especially from Somalia, and Arabs. Around 7.8% of the Muslim community is White (British or other White). Overall, the British Muslim population is substantially younger than the British population overall. The median age of the Muslim population is 25 years, compared to the overall population's median age of 40 years.

[6] I am using the term BAME to make a broad comparison of People of Colour (PoC) to white populations but with the recognition that the term has been criticised due to this stripping of multiple, distinct categories of their uniqueness under one umbrella term. Therefore, BAME is only useful as a term in such collective statistics and comparison contexts. In other contexts, I will refer to either the specific religious or ethnic identities of a group.

According to the MCB report, the highest density of British Muslims is in Greater London (forming 12.4% of the total London population), West Midlands (21.8% of Birmingham's population), the Northwest (15.8% of Manchester's population) and Yorkshire and Humberside (especially Bradford with 24.7% of the population). The geographical distribution of Muslims tends to be concentrated in certain areas in the UK due to the historical chain-migration patterns of immigrant workers moving to areas that needed cheap labour, especially in textile, manufacturing, and food processing industries in the 1950s and 60s (Department for Communities and Local Government & Change Institute 2009; Shaw 2000). Hence, there are 35 Local Authority Districts (LADs), that delineate the administrative boundaries of a district council, where Muslims form 10% or more of the population. Further down in the administrative division, districts usually have wards (the primary unit of English electoral geography) that are represented by councillors who are elected by their ward to sit in the district or county councils. There are 70 wards with a Muslim population of 40% or more. Although these statistics show Muslim populations being concentrated in certain regions, overall there is evidence to show that residential segregation is not as severe as often portrayed in media accounts of 'self-segregating Muslims' (Casciani 2005), and it is decreasing further as Muslims are 'spreading out' (Catney 2016; Wolfe et al. 2011).

The British Muslim population is economically more deprived than the British population overall, with 20% being employed full-time while the number for the overall population is 35%. Although educational attainment levels are improving, British Muslims still have the highest proportion of individuals with no educational qualifications (26%) of all religious groups in Britain (Ali & Muslim Council of Britain 2015: 61). Similarly, 28%

occupy social housing, 5% are in homeless shelters or temporary hostels, and 26% reside in the bottom 10% of the most deprived districts in England. Furthermore, in the prison population of England and Wales, Muslims are disproportionately over-represented with 13% of inmates identifying as Muslim (2015: 18). The reasons for this are multi-faceted with factors related to economic and social marginalisation as well as institutional racism within the criminal justice system towards disadvantaged ethnic minority youth, especially young black men (Sveinsson & Runnymede Trust 2012).

The larger religious context of the UK also helps to understand why British Muslims form a distinctive religious community. For the first time in a census of England and Wales the 2021 census shows that less than half of the population describe themselves as 'Christian' at 46.2% while 'no religion' was the second most common response at 37.2% (ONS 2022: 3). Similar trends can be seen in the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) data conducted by the social research organisation, NatCen, which has been conducting this annual survey since 1983 using random probability sampling that provides a relatively representative sample of the British population. Since they began measuring religious identity in Britain, the percentage of the British public that identifies with Christianity declined from two-thirds of the population to just over one third (38%) in 2018, and concurrently the percentage of the public that state that they do not belong to any religion has increased to a majority of 52% (Kelley 2019: 2). This 'no religion' segment of the population is projected to continue rising with nearly 70% of 15–24-year-olds falling into this category, according to the BSA data released for 2015-17. The most precipitous decline in religious affiliation has occurred for the Church of England but other Christian denominations are also either declining or plateauing over the years.

While Britain becomes less religious and Christian overall, there is a parallel trend of an increase in the segment of the population that identifies as not only Muslim but also devout in their Islamic religious observance. According to a simplified projection of what the religious landscape of the UK will look like in 2040 based on the positions of people who were aged 20-30 in 2013-15 in the BSA, 63 per cent of the public will identify as not having a religion while Muslims will comprise around 8 per cent of the population, larger than the biggest single Christian denomination in the country, Roman Catholicism, which would be around 7 per cent of the population (Rodell 2020: 33).

1.3.3. British Muslim Worldviews

There is a perception in some popular media and cultural discourses that British Muslims do not consider Britain their 'home' and are not proficient in English. In terms of identity, according to the census data, the majority of British Muslims (73%) consider themselves British despite more than half being born outside the country (Ali & Muslim Council of Britain 2015: 34). Other surveys and interviews also reinforce the point that overall Muslim communities in Britain identify strongly with the broader national identity of 'British' (even more than the population as a whole). On the other hand, British Muslims are less likely to identify with the more localized national identities of English, Scottish, Welsh, or Irish as these identities are often perceived as 'ethnic' rather than based on citizenship (Ali 2014). Furthermore, British Muslims are more strongly identified with the UK and at the same time with Islam than their French and German counterparts (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies 2009). Furthermore, the majority of Muslims surveyed reported either having English as their main language, or speaking it proficiently as a second language (Ali & Muslim Council of Britain 2015: 35).

On the other hand, there are surveys that also highlight some aspects of British Muslim views and identities that set them apart from the mainstream British population, thereby making these specific issues key sites of contestation within British Muslims and between them and the broader British public. According to a Pew survey, British Muslims are more likely than Muslims in other Western—or even some Muslim-majority countries—to believe that there is a conflict between being a 'devout Muslim' and 'living in a modern society' like Britain (Pew Research Global Attitudes Project 2006).

Another controversial and highly debated survey was commissioned by Channel 4 for a documentary that was broadcast on 13th April 2016 and provocatively titled, 'What British Muslims Really Think.' They commissioned the social research organisation 'ICM Unlimited' to conduct a survey of the views of British Muslims and to compare them with a representative sample of the British public overall. The survey employed random location, quota-based sampling in locations where the Muslim population was at least 20% of the total population. Hence, representing around 51% of Britain's Muslim population (ICMUnlimited 2016).

The survey confirmed the findings of other surveys that show that the majority of British Muslims identify strongly with the country and feel integrated and free to practise their religion. What caused a stir were the attitudes related to gender equality, LGBTQ+ issues, and violence/terrorism that seemed to diverge from the British mainstream (Stack 2016). For instance, only a minority (34%) said they would report somebody to the police if they knew they were involved in networks supporting terrorism in Syria. A majority (52%) believe that homosexuality should not be legal in Britain and almost half (47%) also claim that gay people should not be allowed to be schoolteachers. Almost a quarter (23%) support

the introduction of *Sharīʿah* law in certain areas of Britain; 32% refuse to condemn those who take part in violence against those who mock the Prophet; 39% agree that wives should always obey husbands and 31% think it is acceptable for a British Muslim man to have more than one wife (Channel 4 2016). Among other issues, this thesis will explore the context within which these survey answers can be understood, and it will suggest that they are linked to Muslim experiences and perceptions of the state and the criminal justice system and the ways the issues of gender and sexuality are deployed in divisive ways in the British public discourse around Muslims.

For instance, the presenter Trevor Phillips, former chairman of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, was criticised by Muslim groups for stating in the documentary that British Muslims were a 'nation within a nation' and the British state should implement a more 'muscular approach to integration' than the type of multiculturalism it currently favours. Miqdaad Versi, representing the MCB, wrote that the poll results do not represent the broader British Muslim population as they were skewed towards those who live in urban ethnic enclaves in deprived neighbourhoods and those who are more likely to be religiously conservative. He stated that such views were a feature of religiosity in general rather than something specific to Muslims, hence, it was unfair to compare conservative religious Muslims with the general British public rather than with similarly religious non-Muslim British (Versi 2016). Versi argued that this survey and programme employed the already prevalent trope of Muslims being the threatening 'Other' that is distinct from the rest of 'us'. He acknowledged that these issues may exist but that they can be addressed more effectively as an issue that exists in various forms in multiple communities in Britain without deploying antagonistic and othering frameworks.

Interestingly, this specific claim that some of these views that seem to make British Muslims distinct from other communities in Britain are not a feature of the religion of Islam, but a feature of socioeconomic marginalisation and level of religiosity has been explored in another more methodologically rigorous study by Ridhi Kashyap and Valerie Lewis. They used the data on British Muslims collected by researchers at the University of Manchester, Harvard University, and the University of Notre Dame for a survey titled 'Faith Matters: British Muslims' (FMBM). This survey was more sensitive than the others as it represented around 67.5 per cent of the Muslim population in Great Britain by including areas with 10 per cent or more Muslim residents. They conducted face-to-face interviews with 480 British Muslims in 2009. Kashyap and Lewis also used a representative sample of non-Muslim Britons from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey 2009 as a comparison group and categorised non-Muslim Britons with other religious identifications separately from non-Muslim Britons who claim no religious affiliation (Kashyap & Lewis 2013: 2124).

They explored the question of whether British Muslims are a distinct religious minority or not. They compared British Muslims with both religious and non-religious non-Muslim Britons on levels of religiosity (practice, belief, and salience) and views on gender, abortion, and homosexuality. They found that British Muslims were overall more religious as a group than other Britons, including British Christians. Muslims were also more conservative on a range of social and moral issues than other Britons. But when they conducted multivariate analyses and held disadvantaged socioeconomic status (SES) and high religiosity equal between the different groups, they found that the differences were substantially reduced. This led them to conclude that British Muslims are similar to other Britons in terms of the factors that predict social conservatism—high religiosity and low

SES—but if those factors are held equal then they do not appear distinctive, except in one area: views on homosexuality and premarital sex. Thus, the researchers concluded: 'We find an independent effect of Islam on attitudes towards premarital sex and homosexuality' (Lewis & Kashyap 2013: 625).

However, what these surveys show are attitudes and beliefs that potentially reflect the contemporary mainstream opinions—or at least public positions—of Muslims in Britain and their understanding of Islam rather than suggest some sort of distinctive and invariable impact of Islam on Muslims. These differences between British Muslims and other religious Britons are useful in understanding contemporary religious discourses and practices in Britain, but do not imply how Islam, as a discursive tradition and a religious practice, functions in other contemporary or historical contexts. Similarly, these contemporary differences in faith communities in Britain do not necessarily indicate how they will function in the future. This thesis highlights the contestations and agreements that occur within contemporary British Muslim communities precisely around these issues to counter the implications of a static Islam without a history or a future. Therefore, these surveys can be understood as highlighting some key areas that have come to serve various functions in the public discourse around Muslim identities and politics.

1.4. WORKING DEFINITION OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

I will describe Progressive Islam and Muslims who identify with it in detail in the next chapter. However, a working definition is given here to facilitate my use of these terms in this thesis. I define 'progressive Muslims', for the purpose of this thesis, as those Muslims who build frameworks of Islamic knowledge, ethics, and practices that incorporate and rework concepts, techniques, and values emerging from the scientific revolution, the

Enlightenment, [7] and—more recently—Postmodernism and Poststructuralism.[8] Unlike more established communities of Muslims, like Shī'i, Sunni, or Salafi Muslims, 'progressive' Muslims are a nascent sociological and theological religious group that is yet to establish itself as a distinct community. These Muslims self-identify using various labels including, but not limited to, Progressive, Reformist, Liberal, Rationalist, Leftist, Marxist, Radical, Critical, Inclusive, Feminist, Engaged, Universalist, Sufi, *Malāmati*[9], Non-denominational, and even Fundamentalist. The same individual may use various terms to describe the 'type' of Muslim they are based on the needs of the context they find themselves in, but most of my interlocutors prefer to identify as 'Muslim'[10] with no other qualifying label attached to their religious identity in their daily lives.

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[7] The Enlightenment is a heavily contested and loosely defined term. I use it to refer to both the historical period and the associated intellectual movement in Europe during the mid-17th and 18th century that forms the basis of 'modernity', which itself is a contested term. The main theme is the reliance on human reason and science to seek 'truth' and positing humans as the arbiter and measure for morality. For Enlightenment philosophers themselves, the Enlightenment was a process of social and psychological development, growth, and progress. For instance, Kant defined the Enlightenment as humanity's increasing reliance on their intellectual powers, scepticism, and empiricism and a rejection of traditional authority (Laursen 1986). The Enlightenment also focused on ideals that became the basis of political philosophies, like liberalism, which plays a large role in progressive Muslim thinking. For more details on what the Enlightenment is and how it is related to 'modernity', see Gay (1996) and Dupré (2004).

[8] Postmodernism is a philosophical movement emerging from late 20th century critique of the concepts and values of modernism and Western society. Specifically, it maintains a suspicion of reason, objectivity, positivism, empiricism, and grand narratives of all kinds. It celebrates relativism, subjectivism, and diversity. It is critical of modernity's claim of progress and points to the various ways the modern project has led to environmental degradation and human suffering. Hence, it is acutely sensitive to how ideologies and knowledge, including science, are limited, socially constructed, and linked to the exercise of power and the maintenance of different types of oppressions. Prominent early postmodern theorists include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson. For an introduction to postmodernism, see O'Donnell (2003). For a discussion on how postmodernism relates to the Enlightenment, see the edited volume by Baker and Reill (2001).

[9] See glossary for definition. *Malāmatiyah* ideas and practices, and the vast body of Sufi thought and practices in general, are a rich source used by 'progressive' Muslims for their religious identities, beliefs, and practices. For more on the *Malāmatiyah*, see Schimmel (1975*)*, Chittick (1989*)*, and Toussulis (2011).

[10] They could be considered non-denominational Muslims, and hence, are similar in that sense to the large proportions of Muslims in the Balkans and Central Asia that self-identify as non-denominational Muslims. This identity of 'just' Muslim does *not* preclude a preference for the practices and styles of a specific sect of Islam for performing rituals like *ṣalāh* (prayers) or *ṣawm* (fasting). Furthermore, this does not preclude identifying culturally or socially as part of a specific sect of Muslims in some contexts. For instance, it is common for

1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Progressive Muslims in their quest to express their Islamic identity and practise their religious faith through engagements with the sacred are doubly marginalised—externally by the British mainstream society and internally by the traditional or mainstream Muslim communities. In this thesis I explore how my interlocutors cope with this experience of being, so to speak, 'on the margins of the margins'. One of the ways in which they do so is to interpret Islam 'progressively' i.e., with the goal of creating change that creates space for them in Islamic discourses, practices, and institutions. The thesis will investigate how the 'minority within a minority' positionality affects the interventions that marginalised[11] Muslims choose to deploy.

From this basic question arise other questions which I answer by focusing upon one major Progressive Muslim organisation, the IMI, for the most part, although I do touch upon other organisations, such as the London Queer Muslims (LQM) in chapter 4 (on gender identity), for instance. Moreover, as far as the relationship of the Progressive Muslims towards the state is concerned, I have compared the IMI's approach to that of Quilliam. The specific questions arising from these overall investigations are:

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many of my interlocutors to claim both a sectarian identity, like Shī'i, in some contexts to symbolise belonging, background, culture, and tradition while also being fiercely committed to being identified as 'just Muslim' and not wanting to limit their belongingness to any specific group of Muslims in other (in fact, most) contexts. I think of their identities as 'hierarchically nested identities' with the non-denominational identity at a higher level and expressing itself in more general contexts while the sectarian identities are salient and employed for more specific contexts and purposes.

[11] It is important to state that these Muslims are not necessarily economically marginalised and often represent professional Muslims with high educational attainment. Hence, they may carry the cultural and economic capital associated with those roles and backgrounds. Regardless of this broader cultural capital, they are marginalised within the Muslim community in terms of their beliefs, practices, identities, as well as the degree of religious authority and power they wield. In addition, they are often marginalised by their religious identity as Muslims within Western societies. Thirdly, these Muslims often have intersectional identities related to gender, disability, ethnicity, and sexuality that place burdens and challenges which are more likely to marginalise them from positions of privilege and influence.

1. What are the discursive features and praxis of Progressive Muslim Organisations, specifically the IMI, that distinguishes them from other traditional mosques?
2. How do Progressive Muslims use epistemological tools, ontological claims, and ethical principles that make it possible for them to be gender-egalitarian, and give leadership roles to women and LGBTQIA + Muslims?
3. What is the relationship of Muslim communities in general, and those belonging to Quilliam and the IMI, to the British state, its criminal justice system, and its organised responses to political violence that is labelled 'Islamist terrorism' (especially the Prevent programme)?

The first three chapters are primarily descriptive in nature and focused on the hermeneutics and practices typically engaged in by Progressive Muslims in my fieldwork sites while the next five chapters explore how these discourses and practices relate to specific issues of gender, sexuality, and the state in the British context. The outline of these chapters is given in more detail below. In a nutshell, I explore the spiritual (e.g. mystical) and intellectual (e.g. theoretical and theological arguments) approaches adopted by Progressive Muslim scholars, activists and others to interpret the faith and their relationship to it. I then explore ritual practices emerging from these religious practises and discourses, followed by an investigation of how British Progressive Muslims' positionality impacts their interaction with broader institutions and power structures, like the mosque and the state.

I aim to expand the way anthropology has understood how 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' impacts and interacts with both the traditional Islamic discursive structures as well as Muslim personhoods and lifeways. This study will also contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation and ethnographic explorations of the nature of the religious-

secular dichotomy as it relates to modes of Muslim personhood. Specifically, it will provide an ethnographic account of Muslim personhoods that unsettles the usual conflation of Islamic religiosity and piety with ethical projects that are formed in opposition to ideologies like secularism, humanism, liberal feminism, or empiricism (Mahmood 2005). In doing so, it will develop the arguments laid out in the anthropological literature on 'everyday Islam' (Fadil & Fernando 2015; Jouili 2009).

1.6. POWER AND MEANING-MAKING: THEORISING 'ISLAM' AND 'MUSLIMS'

In this thesis I will explore the nature of Progressive Muslim subjectivities, interpretations, and lifeways. One approach towards this is to begin with the 'new anthropology of Islam'—a theoretical and methodological approach that views Islam 'as a set of interpretive resources and practices' (Bowen 2012: 3). Bowen challenges the assumption of a 'culture-free' and normative textual 'high Islam' that represents the 'true' essence of Islam, or the opposite approach, as espoused by El-Zein, of conflating all particularistic cultural or individual permutations of Muslim life-ways as the only way to understand or view Islam. He encourages 'taking seriously' the efforts of individuals and communities to grapple with the historical and shared Islamic tradition of texts, ideas, practices, methods, and legal precedents and to utilise them to shape their social practices in ways that meet their contextual needs.

Hence, this approach takes the historic accumulation of shared Islamic traditions seriously and emphasises knowledge of these resources while stressing the evolving nature of these resources and the contextual agency of individuals operating within and through this discursive tradition. It is imperative to focus on how ordinary people interpret, pick and choose, innovate, and creatively apply the shared and vast Islamic tradition to their local socio-historic contexts and personal needs, thereby creating something that they call 'Islam'. This approach

highlights the multiple and contradictory social discourses and practices related to Islam and being Muslim while remaining theoretically agnostic about the claims of interlocutors concerning the authenticity of one, a few, or all interpretations and practices of Islam. Instead, according to this approach, what *can* be said about all claims and practices that attempt to claim legitimacy and authenticity as 'Islamic' is that they emerge from some level of justification and engagement with the rich and evolving Islamic discursive tradition. They almost always include some reference to verses in the Qur'ān and often include the *hadīth*. Other resources that are frequently referred to are: the practices of the companions of the Prophet, the opinions of historical and contemporary legal and theological scholars (*fuqahā*), or the ideas and practices of other pious Muslims, from saints to lay people, over the span of history or in the contemporary world.

Since what I aim to study are organisations, it is helpful to use the insights offered by David Gellner and Eric Hirsch who define organisations as having 'explicit rules, a division of labour, and aims that involve acting on or changing everyday life' (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 2). Religious organisations fulfil these criteria hence the studies of the church, and other religious organisations including mosques. In the case of the Progressive Muslim organisations the rules of exclusion (of women, non-Muslims and those of heterodox religious or sectarian views etc.), hierarchy (the precedence of the male *imam*) and religious credentials are deliberately set aside. This does not mean that there are no rules. In fact, the rule which is 'consciously set up' (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 3) is that of choosing an antinomian deconstruction of these conventions while having rules in place which promote inclusion, debunking of prevalent authority and fluidity of leadership style. To this fluidity of

leadership style along with the creative constructions and understanding of authority we will come to in chapters 2 and 3.

Another helpful approach to studying Islam builds on the theoretical tools developed by both Foucault ('discourse') and the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre with his concept of a 'tradition' as 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument in part about the goods which constitute that tradition' (MacIntyre 1985: 222). Talal Asad used this concept to counter El-Zein's overly flexible and self-negating conception of Islam by stressing the need to begin any study of Islam and Muslims 'from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'ān and the *hadīth*. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artefacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition' (1986: 14). This approach does not discount the foundational texts, interpretive techniques, and historical debates and developments but still highlights the role of power and social structures in the changing and contextual nature of these interpretive resources and arguments.

1.6.1. Power and Islam: Asad's Anthropology of Islam

For Asad the defining characteristic of the Islamic discursive tradition is that it is prescriptive and instructive for practitioners regarding the 'correct' form and purpose of a practice, and it has a history that is applied to the present and related to a future aspiration. According to Asad's conceptualisation of a discursive tradition, it is incumbent to consider the power relations involved in the construction of dominant or orthodox beliefs and practices in each context. But what this conceptualisation of Islam also claims is that a fundamental feature of the Islamic discursive tradition is its drive to establish an 'exclusive truth,' i.e., orthodoxy. The discursive tradition, according to Asad, is a product of power relations and is productive of

power relations: 'Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions…orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power' (1986: 15). Following Foucault's lead in analysing modern dynamics of power as disciplinary and regulatory, Asad's conception of Islam as a discursive tradition is primarily concerned with power as discipline. The purpose of the discursive tradition is to exercise disciplinary power through the production of orthodox knowledge that corrects, excludes, normalises, and regulates practices, social relations, and subjectivities. Hence, whether a practice or belief is heterodox or orthodox, it is Islamic if it refers to a past and future, has a tradition, and seeks orthodoxy, i.e., 'the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones' (1986: 15).

Hence, instead of viewing argument and conflict over the form and significance of practices as a symptom of 'crisis' it can be seen as an intrinsic part of any discursive tradition. Islam in this conception is always tied to 'reason' as it is deployed to try to '*win someone over*' and is one of the various tools a person or group of people can use in the back-and-forth struggle to coerce, discipline, influence, or persuade others to achieve dominance or orthodoxy. According to the Foucauldian model of power where there is power there is resistance, hence a discursive tradition will always have heterogeneity and multivocality as resistance is intrinsic to the tradition. Asad writes, 'Power, and resistance, are thus intrinsic to the development and exercise of any traditional practice' (1986: 16). He claims that even if there is always heterogeneity in the Islamic traditions there is also always an aspiration to achieve coherence. What this means in terms of an anthropology of Islam, for Asad, is that it will seek to understand the historical and contemporary social conditions which describe why

people are arguing, why one argument gains more power over another, and what content and reasoning are displayed in those arguments.

This theoretical lens is very helpful as it fits well with the nature of the discourse and practices of several Progressive Muslim individuals and groups. For instance, the practice of female *imāms* leading mixed-gender congregational prayers is justified through reason and a reference to history (for details, see Chapter 3). Hence, using Asad's theoretical conception of 'Islam' it is informative to describe and analyse 'the kinds of reasoning, and the reasons for arguing' (1986: 16) that underlie Progressive Muslim discourses and practices. While the kinds of reasoning utilised by Progressive Muslims diverge from those of other Muslim actors participating in the Islamic discursive tradition, their reasons for arguing are similar to all other Muslim actors at the most general level as they are connected to the domains that Asad advises should be the focus of an anthropology of Islam: 'the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges' (1986: 7).

On the other hand, this theoretical model is based on a theory of power that primarily imagines the social world and Islam as a struggle for control and dominance. This Nietzschean 'Will to Power' is considered the primary motive whether it occurs through coercion, influence, or free assent, and whether it is justified by ethical, moral, and spiritual concerns or understood in terms of seeking power, status, and resources. But the projects of ethical self-formation that my interlocutors engaged in through hermeneutical engagements with Islam took varied forms, with some that do not fit Asad's model. While Asad is clear about the inevitable heterogeneity, diversity, plurality, contradictions, and change in Islamic discursive traditions due to the varying views and practices of actors who intervene in the tradition and

the shifting nature of power relations and social contexts, the drive is always understood to be towards attempting coherence and establishing orthodoxy. Similarly, while he stresses that orthodoxy does not mean uniformity as there are always spaces and parameters set to encourage and allow variance and debate even in the strictest orthodox tradition, the overall imperative remains specifying the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate variance and debate. Hence, the Islamic scholar Shahab Ahmed describes Asad's conceptualisation of Islam as replacing the culturalist claim that 'Islam is whatever Muslims say it is,' to 'whatever Muslims say it is *authoritatively*' (Ahmed 2016: 272).

Given that any system of thought and community of practices requires some conceptual and ethical boundaries to be meaningful, the question is whether all forms of knowledge/power work to discipline, regulate, exclude, correct, and, hence, establish an orthodoxy. There are text-based, systematising, rationalistic, and legalistic frameworks of Progressive Muslims' discourse that build in pluralism, contradictions, diversity, and change within their approaches to facilitate more freedom—which is always situated and constrained according to the context rather than unbounded—for individuals to construct personally meaningful interpretations and practices. To enable such religious spaces and practices to occur, there are parameters that are set that exclude and correct but I would argue that the intentions and goals for setting those parameters cannot be considered uniform in all discursive structures. As we shall see in Chapter 3, the IMI emphasizes the creation of safe spaces where inclusion—of heterodox gender roles, diverse sexual identities and non-normative political views—is the defining principle.

Furthermore, not only do the differences in the space for individual creativity, exploration, and diversity matter in conceptualising discursive traditions, but also the intention

and goal of the exercise of power cannot be restricted purely to different forms of control and domination, as it excludes the way people experience their own religious goals and intentions; for instance, when they describe acting from and/or for experiences of liberation, love, compassion, belonging, health, joy, or nurturance of the self and others among other non-dominative aims. This is most clearly visible in other Progressive Muslim approaches that do not focus on textual hermeneutics, reason/rationality, or rules and regulations as the primary mode of meaning making as a Muslim. These latter approaches are intensely personal, subjective, affective, and focused on accessing experiential and somatic knowledge of 'The Divine,' achieved through self-transformational spiritual practices. Despite these forms of Progressive Muslim approaches to Islam being highly variable personal experiences, they are understood by most practitioners as intrinsically linked to communal and social transformation. Hence, there are shared practices, beliefs, ethics, etiquettes, knowledge, vocabularies, goals, politics, spaces, and relationships that emerge from modes of Progressive Islamic discourses and practices that are experiential and multiple, conceived as individual spiritual journeys that cannot be easily systematised, rationalised, judged, or compared.

1.6.2. Different Modes of Power

Within Foucault's theoretical trajectory one can discern a shift from exploring power/knowledge in its historically specific forms of 'discipline' and 'regulation,' with the accompanying resistances, to the place of conceptions of 'ethics,' 'freedom,' 'hermeneutics,' and 'technologies of self' within his theoretical conception of power. Most of Foucault's work before volumes two and three of *The History of Sexuality* focused on tracing the genealogy of how 'disciplinary' and 'regulatory' (biopower) power not only constructs disciplines that define the discursive limits of knowledge, but also constitutes the very subjectivity through which a person views the world and themselves (Foucault 1978, 1995). Disciplinary power

works through the 'micro-physics' of everyday interactions in ways that it is embodied and internalised to create 'docile bodies' that no longer require obvious external force or coercion to be efficient and useful within an extractive and exploitative social machinery (Foucault 1995: 138). Hence, these forms of power are historically constituted and contingent rather than inevitable or essential, and they constrain but never restrain behaviour: 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free' (Foucault 1982: 790).

Developing this idea in more detail in his later work, Foucault describes 'technologies of the self' as the self-directed practices of self-care meant to transform the self, which is a form of situated freedom that always occurs within the parameters and constraints of a particular historical and political situation. Hence, while *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* primarily explore the emergence of the modern subject as an effect of disciplinary power on bodies, *The History of Sexuality,* Volumes II and III, and the lecture course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* explore the body as a locus of freedom by focusing on ancient Greek and Roman philosophers' practices of ethical self-formations (1986, 1988, 2005). Frédéric Gros, an editor of Foucault's 1982 lecture series at the Collège de France, observes that after the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* there is a change in Foucault's theoretical framework, which Gros describes as 'a slow maturation, of a development with neither break nor commotion, which brought Foucault to the shores of the care of the self…a true subject was possible, therefore, no longer in the sense of subjection, but of subjectivation' (2005: 509–511).

The key point here is that Foucault did not see power as inevitably about dominance and hierarchy, and the associated disciplinary and normalising knowledge regimes based on the discourse of 'truth' and 'reason,' but, instead, since power is socio-historically contingent,

it cannot be reduced to one model. Hence, Foucault broadened his conception of power to an immanent force in social relations rather than a thing that can be possessed and described as 'a transformative capacity, the ability of an individual to influence and modify the actions of other individuals in order to realize certain tactical goals' (Heller 1996: 83). Foucault conceptualised power as 'games of strategy,' where subjects' practices of self-care and ethical self-formation are embodied sites where alternate models of power are manifested, ones not geared towards the creation of docile bodies but self-mastery. Since he contends that 'there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives' (1978: 95), this opens a lens to analyse *other* aims and objectives of power, like freedom, ethics, self-care, play, nurturance, love, spirituality, and exploration. Here, power is distributed in a more 'open-ended,' 'non-exclusive,' and 'reversable' manner (Foucault 2020: 298–299).

Therefore, understanding Foucauldian conceptualisation of power as a transformational capacity allows us to discern both liberative and dominative power-relations encoded in Islamic discursive traditions. Thus, practices of self-care can be means to play these games of power in ways that can reduce *or* increase the space for 'concrete freedom' for one, more, or all 'players'—the space where experimentations, explorations, transformations, and possibilities are available (Foucault 1990: 36). Shahab Ahmed uses a similar line of argument to critique Asad's conceptualisation of Islam as diverse and variable but with a model of power that focuses on authoritative, prescriptive, and exclusivist Islamic discourses. He writes, 'To understand the discursive tradition of Islam, we must conceive not only of prescriptive authority, but of what I should like to call explorative authority—the authority to explore' (2016: 282). And it is the authority to explore what Islam is and how they relate to it which is the quest of Progressive Muslims.

1.7. CONSTRUCTING THE 'FIELD': BRITISH PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM CIVIL SOCIETY

Contemporary ethnographic work often requires the active and effortful 'construction of the field' by the ethnographer in a way that highlights the central concepts and social phenomena of the research instead of locating a field site that already exists 'out there' (Amit 2000). Despite substantial interactions and connections within the Progressive Muslim networks, the various individuals I interacted with do not necessarily know each other or identify with each other as members of the same 'community'. Amit and Rapport (2002) argue that the concept of 'community' is 'too vague, too variable in its applications and definitions to be of much utility as an analytical tool' (2002: 13). They contend that the concept does not describe a distinct social group or organisation with clear boundaries 'out there' but instead people use the term 'community' performatively to evoke aspirations, positive emotions, and contextual social affiliations.

For instance, in his study of London's Southall neighbourhood, Gerd Baumann (1996) claims that the dominant discourse about identity in Britain imagines clear 'communities' based on social categories, like race, ethnicity, and religion, that also share distinct, stable, and bounded cultures. Depending on the context, Southallians both utilize these dominant discourses about 'community' as well as contest them to access resources, form relationships, and make political claims. Through exploring how Southallians engage strategically with the concepts of 'community' and 'culture', Baumann argues that contestations of culture and community 'lie at the heart of a shared Southall culture' as they provide flexible resources for forming alliances and bonds according to the needs of different situations (1996: 35).

Likewise, as I worked on the methods for my research and decided on which sites and interlocutors to contact to begin my fieldwork, I discovered similar dynamics of community formation where contestations about identity and beliefs play a crucial role in creating, re-shaping, and delineating boundaries and alliances. As mentioned in the introduction, my interlocutors use identification terms flexibly, critically, strategically, and contextually rather than being committed to a single term of identification in all contexts. The contestations around correct Islamic beliefs, practices, and the terms that delineate and differentiate between different British Muslim groups are crucial and flexible resources for individuals and organisations to meet their goals and needs. This meant that I was not necessarily, or usually, relying on people using the term 'progressive Muslim' as a self-identifier to include them within my research, but instead I based my inclusion criteria on professed personal and/or organisational aims and how those aims are linked to approaches to Islamic beliefs and practices.

Before I began the formal fieldwork period, I spent a few months establishing contacts with various British organisations that I place within the category of 'progressive Muslim', based on the definition of the term I proposed above, i.e., Muslims who build frameworks of Islamic knowledge, ethics, and practices that incorporate and promote concepts, techniques, and values emerging from the scientific revolution, The Enlightenment, and—more recently—Postmodernism and Poststructuralism. Although, most of these organisations do not use the exact word 'progressive Muslim' as a self-identifier for their organisation or as a personal identifier, they still use this term as an identifier occasionally. Furthermore, the term 'progressive Muslim' and 'progressive Islam' is used by these

individuals and organisations in different contexts to analytically describe their approaches to Islam, even if it is not a term they uncritically accept as an identity label.

In each organisation I stated at the outset my intention to conduct participant observation and ethnographic interviews for my D.Phil. thesis research on 'progressive' Muslims. The process of approval and induction varied according to the nature of the organisation. Overall, I approached eight different Progressive Muslim organisations and ended up with a focus on four of those organisations: the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI), Quilliam, London Queer Muslims (LQM), and Muslim Education Centre of Oxford (MECO). Since both Quilliam and the IMI were registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) their induction process was more formalised than my experience with the other two organisations. While I participated in the events held by MECO and LQM, I was not officially a part of the structure of the organisation, but in the case of Quilliam and IMI, I applied and was accepted as an intern and volunteer respectively. I had to undergo interviews and fill formal applications with details of my research activities and focus. The IMI also assigned a board member who could act as my key point-of-contact and research supervisor.

During the beginning of my fieldwork, I interned at Quilliam for six months mostly shadowing the head of their Islamic Studies department, Sheikh Usama Hasan, as he went about his day meeting people and networking, offering lectures and talks, and being interviewed by journalists. This was a very thought-provoking and informative part of my fieldwork, but I soon realised that the unique immersive nature of being an ethnographer also provided a challenge for working with such organisations. The main issue with being an ethnographer of organisations is that substantial activity and work occurs in the non-public and confidential space, especially when studying organisations that are doing work that is

considered sensitive, private, and controversial. Eventually, Quilliam made me sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) that mandated that I could not share confidential strategic and policy information. The agreement was worded in a manner which was vague enough to cover potentially any element of my research that was not directly approved by the board of Quilliam. Therefore, when it comes to Quilliam I could only focus on, and write about, public events, texts, and discussions.

Overall, confidentiality and anonymity were issues at the forefront of my ethnographic practice with all the organisations and interlocutors due to the highly personal and sensitive nature of issues related to religious identity, relationships, sexuality, activism, and politics. Therefore, interlocutors' identities and names have been anonymised except when I am referring to events and identities that are already in the public domain. My aim has been to keep the welfare of my interlocutors and the needs of the organisations at the forefront while writing this thesis. Therefore, in some cases I have had to make the decision to prioritise the privacy, safety, and professional interests of my interlocutors and the organisations they are associated with over the benefits that could result from including some potentially informative details or analyses in this thesis.

The participant observation required flexibility in both fieldwork schedule and methods as the events and meetings that I relied on to connect with my interlocutors and gain experiences did not usually have a fixed time or date. Some events operated on a fixed schedule like the IMI's Friday prayers or the LQM's Sufi *dhikr* (recollection or remembrance of The Divine) and queer *ijtihād* (independent reasoning and interpretation of the Qur'ān and *hadīth*) sessions, but most of the events and meetings occurred on a varying, and often unpredictable, schedule. I made sure that I stayed connected with my main contact person at

each organisation and followed the group's social media accounts and internal communications (if I had access to them). I volunteered to help set up and manage as many of the events as I could to contribute to the groups and gain experience. Therefore, I usually attended around two to three formal events every week and went to several informal events and gatherings. I also volunteered with the groups and helped with different tasks ranging from writing reports, researching, and organising events.

Moreover, I attended and volunteered at relevant conferences and presented my own research and observations at some of them. The conferences proved to be excellent fieldwork sites as they allowed me to meet many relevant people and get insightful viewpoints and comments related to the key research themes and questions. Most importantly, I conducted twenty in-depth unstructured ethnographic interviews with individuals who are active in these spaces and social networks. For these I used an audio recorder to record the interviews. I took brief field notes immediately on my phone during these interviews and during most participant observation contexts. The audio recordings and fieldnotes were used to write more detailed field notes on my laptop. The interview transcripts, field notes, and other relevant documents were organised, coded, and analysed using NVivo software during and post-fieldwork.

I also employed 'polymorphous engagement' (Gusterson 1997) where I not only gathered data from participant observation and semi-structured interviews from different sites, but also from surveying a variety of online, offline, textual, audio-visual, official, and unofficial sources of information. Digital spaces are important sites where individuals and organisations debate and construct doctrine, boundaries, and identities that have significant impact on power structures, social practices, and individual subjectivities. I spent

considerable time on digital platforms like WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages populated by Progressive Muslims as well as those online websites and forums where Progressive Muslims and their work are the subject of discussion. These online spaces were crucial for my research because interlocutors live substantial parts of their lives online and do important conceptual and relational work in these virtual spaces. This primarily involved participant observation on Facebook, WhatsApp, email listservs, online forums, Twitter, and websites as well as text-based and audio-visual (for instance, through Skype and Zoom) semi-structured interviews and informal interactions.

Within the LQM and the IMI, I was partly involved in a variant of 'action research' where ethnographers work in a collaborative and participatory way with research participants to help them pursue their cultural goals and solve practical problems in the field (Merriam & Tisdell 2016: 49). This kind of 'action research' included digital action research because of the influential and expanding role played by digital technologies in these social fields, e.g., helping manage the Facebook page of the LQM and participating in WhatsApp groups to organize events. All the organisations, as well as most of the individual activists, I worked with have websites or some sort of social media presence. Part of my engagement with my interlocutors involved interacting with and contributing to the online spaces and content of these organisations. Hence, my method utilised some of the tools developed to conduct ethnographic research on, and through, digital technologies (Boellstorff 2012; Pink et al. 2016; Underberg & Zorn 2013).

Forte (2004) discussed the protocols and benefits of engaging in online 'action research' when he wrote about his experiences collaborating with his research partners to create a website about their culture. Through this method, he learned dimensions of his interlocutors'

culture and the processual nature of producing culture that would not be accessible as easily through traditional methods. These digital spaces are also attractive due to their multi-sensorial nature with the rich range of textual, pictorial, and audio-visual data that are produced, edited, shared, and deleted by interlocutors (Pink 2015). For instance, I gained insight into the way individuals promote themselves and their messages, the role of anonymity in expressiveness and inhibitions, and the use of audio-visual and pictorial memes (Hine 2009).

My fieldwork relied on participant observation in the everyday life, dilemmas, contestations, and negotiations of Progressive British Muslims at specific 'nodes' in their social networks. I conducted my fieldwork primarily in London and Oxford over a period of eighteen months from July 2017 till January 2019. I participated in weekly lectures, *halaqahs* (Qur'ān study groups), prayer gatherings, Sufi *dhikr* sessions, social events, conferences, and informal 'hang-outs' organized by various members of the following four organisations: Quilliam, the IMI, LQM and MECO. As Quilliam is described in some detail in Chapter 7 and the IMI in Chapter 3, as well as being the focus of investigation elsewhere, I will describe the last two briefly here:

I. London Queer Muslims (LQM)

London Queer Muslims was founded in November 2017 in London by a group of practising queer Muslims who felt the need for a space where they could express and explore their intersectional identities fully as Muslim and Queer. The need for this space was felt acutely because of the exclusion they experienced in both heteronormative Muslim spaces and simultaneously in homonormative LGBT spaces[12]. They felt that 'both spaces have become

[12] Heteronormative refers to the social assumptions, practices, and institutions that privilege heterosexuality and traditional gender roles while erasing queer people and their lives. On the other hand, homonormative

equally structured in order to position queer Muslims in an unwarranted state of debate as a condition for involvement' (LQM 2019: 1). Furthermore, they felt that even events and organisations that are geared primarily towards LGBTQ+ Muslims cater to the fulfilment of social needs rather than specifically religious and spiritual needs. Other queer Muslim spaces also tend to focus primarily on cis-gendered LGB Muslims. LQM is a space where the different equally important aspects of their identities can exist without a need to justify how Islam and queerness can exist together.

It is governed as an unincorporated charity with an elected board comprising a chair, secretary, treasurer, and advisors. They focus in their activities and events on emphasizing segments of the queer Muslim community that are often under-represented and marginalised. Specifically, they aim to provide leadership opportunities to, and centre the voices of, trans, intersex, non-binary, asexual, bisexual, and pansexual Muslims in addition to the cis-male gay Muslim perspective seen at other LGBTQ+ Muslim organisations. The organisation functions primarily as a space where members can practise Islam in a manner where their queerness is pivotal to spirituality rather than a hindrance. Hence, the two main events of the group relate to 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' hermeneutics of Islam: *ijtihād* workshops and *dhikr* circles (see chapter 2).

At *ijtihād* workshops members read and discuss Islamic texts to understand Islam from a personally constructed queer lens. In each workshop different members lead the discussion on a specific topic that relate to concerns and challenges of the quotidian existence of queer Muslims. All members are encouraged to independently reason, read,

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refers to the privileging of heteronormative ideals and constructs for queer identities and cultures in ways that end up strengthening heteronormativity. Homonormativity will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

explore, and research the topic and try to build consensus on it. At *dhikr* circles the focus is less on reason, research, and knowledge from reading and discussing and more on experiential knowledge, affective involvement, and spiritual bonding with fellow members and the Divine. The spiritual practice of *dhikr* is practised in all Sufi traditions. This practice consists of chanting the names of Allah and focusing on the experiential presence of the Deity and, in some cases, the Prophet of Islam. The *dhikr* sessions of the LQM primarily follow Bektashi[13] traditions as one of the founders of the group is a British Muslim from a Balkan Bektashi family background, and through their efforts the group received recognition and blessing from a Bektashi spiritual leader (*Baba*) in Turkey.

The *dhikr* was often practised within the context of a spiritual concert (*samāʿ*) that followed precise ritual rules involving instruments, like the flute and tambourine, rhythmic movements, sequence of activities, and human voice. This type of sacred music is believed to help the mystic seek temporary knowledge, or even unity, with the Essence of the Divine. The idea is that one transcends the consciousness of time and space and experiences a new, esoteric, dimension of subjective reality (*ḥāl*) accessible only through the cultivation of a deep connection to The Divine at that moment.

II. Muslim Education Centre of Oxford (MECO)

Dr Taj Hargey, who has been mentioned earlier, is an *imām* and scholar based in Oxford who founded this organisation to promote a Progressive understanding of Islam and create a community of like-minded individuals. He also set up a mosque in 2014 in Cape Town, South Africa, called 'The Open Mosque'. Both MECO and The Open Mosque are meant to

[13] *The Encylopaedia of Islam* has an informative chapter on Alevis (Vishanoff 2011). For a classic study on Bektashi Islam with a focus on the history, beliefs, and rituals consult John Kingsley Birge's study 'The Bektashi Order of Dervishes'. (1937)

be inclusive Muslim spaces that do not adhere to any specific sect of Islam. Dr Hargey calls himself a radical and fundamentalist Muslim because he primarily bases his beliefs and actions on the 'fundamentals' of the Qur'ān rather than other sources, like the *ḥadīth* or *fiqh*. His mosque in Cape Town led to vocal and violent opposition from the local Muslim *imāms* and from the local government council of the area. Dr. Hargey described how the opposition campaign stirred up so much emotion and hostility towards this mosque that it was firebombed three times since it commenced operations in September 2014. The five principles that guide the Open Mosque and MECO are: Qur'ān-centricity, gender equality, non-sectarianism, inter-cultural cooperation and understanding, and independence from the state and other powerful institutions (Hargey n.d.).

MECO holds Friday prayers weekly in Oxford where men and women can pray together, and the prayers and sermons are in Arabic and English. It also holds weekly Qur'ān *ḥalaqah* where different topics are explored by a close reading and discussion of Qur'ānic verses. Participants are encouraged to raise questions without fear and discuss any matter, no matter how controversial it is, related to the topic and their understanding of the Qur'ān. MECO also arranges conferences, talks, and regularly participates in the media over various debates concerning Muslims (Hargey n.d.).

1.8. THESIS STRUCTURE

After this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2, I take up the challenge of defining the category of 'Progressive Muslim'. What makes this category of believers different from other Muslim groups and identities? To answer these questions, I explore the theological and sociological nature of Progressive Muslim theology, communities, and practices. One important aspect of the construction of the Progressive belief system is the use of hermeneutical tools to

rationalise ethical commitments to women's rights, peace, respect for diversity and heterodox opinions and practices related to gender and sexuality. This chapter will explore two approaches to understanding Islam, the spiritual and the rational, with their attendant assumptions and resources. The latter approach focuses on how Islamic scholars and academics construct the discourse of 'progressive Islam'.

Chapter 3 introduces my main site of ethnographic work—the Inclusive Mosque Initiative. Briefly, this organisation is at the forefront of promoting female ritual leadership in religious spaces. Hence, women often serve as the *mu'adhin*,[14] *khaṭīb*,[15] and *imām*[16] in congregational prayers. In this chapter, I take a detailed look at their ritual performance of the Friday prayers as these rituals help to understand how Progressive Muslim theology and practices link to broader issues of gender and power in Muslim communities. The ritual practices at IMI are a major divergence from the traditional gendered power structure of Islamic religious institutions and have led to some backlash from other Muslims and Islamic organisations.

Overall, however, the board and members often remark that there have been remarkably *few* negative experiences and interactions with other Muslims. In general, while not agreeing with the policies of certain other Muslim organisations, the IMI focuses on developing its own community and resources rather than publicly confronting and criticising other organisations. They stress that the British media often tries to elicit responses from them that can fit the narrative of British Muslims as being essentially violent and conservative by showcasing how Muslims have been attacking the liberal 'good Muslims'.

[14] The person who makes the call for prayers (*adhānn*).
[15] The person who gives a sermon before the prayers.
[16] The person who leads the communal prayers from the front.

This highlights the theme of the 'minority within a minority' positionality of Progressive Muslims that I explore in this thesis where Progressive Muslims are keenly aware of the way their religious interventions have variable impacts depending on who the 'audience' of their statements is. The 'internal' religious discourse and critique stresses issues of gender and sexuality while the focus of their work addressing an 'external', or non-Muslim audience, is centred on the political consequences of Islamophobic and racist discourses that utilise issues of gender and sexuality as core aspects for constructing a threatening Muslim 'Other'.

In Chapter 4, I will focus on the 'internal' discourses and practices related to gender and Islam among these Progressive Muslim groups. The IMI is a pioneering institution as far as female leadership is concerned. However, despite its emphasis on inclusiveness, and effort at integrating and providing a sacred space to people who, while adhering to their Muslim identities, belong to gender and sexual identities perceived as being problematic by mainstream Muslim organisations, its efforts fall short of satisfying some people. This bears out the observation that identities, such as trans, non-binary and intersex Muslims, are seen as being problematic by even Progressive Muslims and there are challenges in accommodating them (Shannahan 2014). Hence, other Progressive organisations such as the LQM and a sufi *dhikr* circle are described to give a broader view of how these different Progressive Muslim spaces accommodate variance and diversity in gender and sexuality.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with another issue that has become salient in public, as well as British Muslim, discourses on Islam: How do queer people fit into an Islamic community? Chapter 5 explains certain theoretical concepts, such as homonationalism and queerness, without which the role that LGBTQIA+ identities play in contemporary discourses on British Muslims is difficult to understand. The question of the status, identities, roles, and rights of

such minorities within Muslim communities in Britain is a highly politicised one that is utilised for various purposes, including justifications for increased securitisation and surveillance of Muslims.

Hence, the issue of sexual orientation is not only limited to the surface level concern for LGBTQI+ rights but functions within discourses and practices of racialisation in contemporary British contexts. This is explored with reference to some significant events, such as the controversy about teaching students about diversity in people's sexual orientation in schools (the 'No Outsiders Programme'), which resulted in protests by some Muslim parents in Birmingham and which were depicted in the media as a highly visible example of how Muslims are a threat to 'British values', and by tracing the events around the controversial London East End Gay Parade (EEGP). The point is to understand how Muslims with such sexual and gender identities face opposition from Muslims (internal criticism) while also being stigmatised by the mainstream (primarily White) British community, including the LGBTQIA+, community as not 'properly' queer, or simply threatening to the queer community.

Thus, the figure of 'queer Muslims' has come to play important symbolic roles in boundary constructions of both 'Muslim' and non-Muslim 'British' identities. The chapter will explore how Progressive Muslims engage with these events and discourses and how their politics is informed by their religious commitments and practices. On the other hand, Chapter 6 shifts focus from the roles queer Muslim identities play in inter-group dynamics between Muslims and non-Muslim in Britain to the ways Progressive Muslim discourses and practices are employed *within* Muslim community spaces to engage with the practical and theological challenges perceived by Muslim families with LGBTQIA+ family members.

The next two chapters, 7 and 8, are about Progressive Muslim engagements with the politics of counter-radicalisation. What positions do Progressive Muslims take on the British state's counter-extremism policies, like the Prevent strategy? How do these positions relate to the religious and political context of my interlocutors? These questions are answered in two chapters because, as in the case of sexual orientation, this too is an instance of the challenges and opportunities of the positionality of being a minority within a minority. Chapter 7 studies the position of Quilliam while the subsequent chapter (8) is on the position of the IMI. For Quilliam, cases of Islamic extremism can be detected and prevented from causing harm, while the IMI argues that this process stigmatises and harms Muslims, particularly those who are visibly Muslim and the most marginalised.

The last chapter concludes with the key points that emerge from observing and participating in these British Progressive Muslim spaces. I highlight how the 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' approaches to Progressive Islam are overlapping yet distinct modes of *being* a Progressive British Muslim. While the 'intellectual' approach aligns with contemporary empiricist, rationalistic, legal, and textual epistemological frameworks, the 'spiritual' approach represents a more radical departure. Furthermore, Progressive Muslims represent a population at the margins of Muslim communities that are experimenting with novel and creative approaches addressing and engaging with precisely those issues that have come to represent 'fault-lines' in discourses and identities of Muslims and non-Muslims in the British context. Hence, despite their marginality they provide a case study for the nature of discursive and praxis interventions that emerge from contemporary engagements of Muslims with the challenges and opportunities in their daily lives and social contexts.

Finally, the thesis focuses on the delicate balancing act that is required for my interlocutors in their personal and public Islamic meaning-making and practices due to their positionality as a minority within a minority. Within a context of powerful Islamophobic discourses and practices, any critique of mainstream Islamic authority structures can potentially lend itself to strengthening other oppressions Progressive Muslims face as Muslim minorities even if it results in a successful resistance to oppressions justified through Islamic rhetoric. Therefore, British Progressive Muslims seek to align themselves with the broader Muslim community to challenge Islamophobia, classism, racism, and particularly the counter-extremism state practices while concurrently advancing and practising Islam in ways that challenge, or at the minimum provide alternatives to, traditional Islamic authority structures.

1.9. CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the motivations and research questions that will guide this thesis. I also gave a broad view of British Islam and Muslims pointing out their diversity and position in British mainstream society. More importantly, I described my field of research, gave a working definition of Progressive Muslims, and introduced the four organisations that form the core of my ethnography. In the end I provided a brief outline of the chapters in this thesis. I have laid out the theoretical framework for analysing my fieldwork experiences and observations focusing on the concept of 'power' as not only systematising and regulating but also exploratory and ambiguous.

This lens helps to understand the meaning-making practices of Progressive Muslims as they respond to the specific challenges and opportunities of living as minorities within a minority religious group in the UK. Although the religious discourses and practices of British Progressive Muslims often focus on correcting what they believe are unjust and un-Islamic

practices there are also other motivations and approaches to their religiosity. Specifically, I explore how Progressive Muslims shape themselves through religious discourses and practices in ways that help them feel empowered to pursue life goals in the British context that might otherwise be considered un-Islamic according to mainstream Muslim discourses. This 'Islamicising' of their lives occurs through textual hermeneutics, spiritual practices, communal affiliations, and political activism.

2. Progressive Muslims and Their Hermeneutics

'Islam will emerge from the margins,' Rizwan declared provocatively to a gathering of around thirty people in Central London. We were all attending a *Jum'ah* prayer held by the IMI which will be described in detail in chapter 3. Rizwan, one of the regular congregants at the IMI, was responding to a young Muslim woman who was visiting it that afternoon for the first time. The woman was part of a contingent of students from a London-based university who were brought by their professor to observe these prayers and have a discussion with the leaders and congregants at IMI as part of their undergraduate 'sociology of Islam' course. This brief remark provides an entry into a discussion of what Progressive Muslims describe as their core theological, hermeneutical, and ethical principles, which they trace to their concept of the *Rūḥ*[17].

The prayers were led by one of IMI's female *imāms* and the students were invited to have an informal discussion over tea afterwards. The student had just stated that she had researched the four main Sunni schools of *fiqh*[18] as well as the Shī'i Ja'fari *fiqh*, and she did not see any credible support for women leading mixed-gender prayers that include men who are *ghayr maḥram*[19] for that woman. She expressed her concern that such prayers were

[17] Roughly translated as soul, spirit, essence, and breath (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 387–388). In progressive Muslim interpretations it often refers to the unity of the Divine Spirit with the Revelation, Inspiration, Information, Truth, or Command that is potentially accessible to, and within, all human beings (Yüksel et al. 2007: 191).

[18] *Fiqh* refers to the body of juridical principles and techniques that makes up the field of *usūl al-fiqh* as well as the specific laws, rules, regulations, and ethics that emerge from these techniques to form the traditional established schools of Islamic law.

[19] The concept of *maḥram* emerges from Qur'anic verses like Sūrah al-Noor 24:31 which specifies the list of men in front of whom a Muslim woman can reveal her beauty or 'adornments' (*zīnah*). The concept is debated, like all concepts in Islam, but the mainstream schools of *fiqh*, which reflect the prevalent beliefs in Muslim societies, interpret it as the basic guiding concept for gender norms in Islamic societies. At the most basic level it divides the social world for each person based on the opposite gender people who are, or are not, potentially eligible for marriage to them. This basic social division is further elaborated as referring to all those close relatives around whom women *do not* have 'to draw their veils' (*khumur*). Veiling is usually interpreted as

harām,[20] and hence, she had chosen not to participate in the prayers that afternoon. Rizwan conceded that the contemporary mainstream schools of *fiqh* do not support women leading mixed-gender public prayers, but this does not necessarily invalidate this practice and, he added provocatively, in fact, in this case, it made it *more* legitimate for him! The student looked visibly shocked by this statement and asked incredulously, 'How does ignoring centuries of Islamic expertise and tradition make these practices more valid? Isn't it a bit arrogant?' Rizwan responded a bit cautiously—perhaps recognising that his opinion is highly controversial—by stressing that this is his opinion and not necessarily shared by others at IMI.

This is a standard practice at IMI. All individuals who offer the *khuṭbah*, lead *halaqah* (Qur'ān study circles), or even participate in interviews about the organisation always make it a point to—and are expected to—stress that all the opinions and points they make are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the IMI. The official IMI positions are publicly released statements drafted and approved by the board of trustees. These are released either on the official IMI website (IMI n.d.) and social media pages or through officially approved media interviews where the board members explicitly state that they are expressing the official IMI position rather than their personal views. Reflecting this institutional versus personal distinction, it should also be assumed that any opinion expressed by anyone associated with the IMI mentioned in this thesis is *not*

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covering hair and/or wearing loose garments that cover the shape of the body. Furthermore, it is elaborated in *fiqh* traditions to include broader etiquette and norms of social behaviour that should go with these basic gender norms, focusing mostly on rules related to women's mobility, sociality, dress, careers, and public roles (Kodir 2013).

[20] *Fiqh* categorises Islamic commands governing the acts of Muslims into five types: *farḍ* (compulsory), *mustahabb* (recommended), *mubāh* (neutral), *makrūh* (reprehensible), and *harām* (forbidden).

necessarily reflective of the official values, goals, or practices of the organisation, unless I specifically state it as such.

Rizwan elaborated that the *fiqh* traditions are the product of the minority of male jurists and scholars who held discursive and legalistic power in Muslim societies over the centuries rather than a result of true *ijmā*[21]; while they may have got a lot correct, the body of knowledge and laws still reflect their particular interests, biases, values, and assumptions. He continued that those practices and beliefs have often been biased and harmful to those who were marginalised and excluded from the status, influence, and power required to contribute to the development of Islamic knowledge and traditions. These included women, other gender minorities, sexual minorities, and various religious, political, ethnic, and economic groups. Hence, not conforming to certain aspects of the traditional *fiqh*, in Rizwan's view, was the more moral and Islamic course of action. The young female student countered that *fiqh*, and other branches of Islamic knowledge traditions, emerge from a rational and systematic system of knowledge concerning the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*[22] rather than from human desires, prejudices, or—as she put it—'the fashion of the times'. The two of them

[21] *Ijmā'* traditionally refers to *ijmā' aṣ-ṣaḥabāh* or the consensus of the companions of the Prophet. More broadly, it functions to uphold traditional authority in the past, i.e., what was normative and agreed about in the early years of Islam or by past religious scholars. It is considered one of the basic methods used to establish Islamic jurisprudence in most Sunni schools of jurisprudence. But the concept is also used in the non-traditional way to refer to either the (aspirational goal of) contemporary consensus of the Muslim community as whole, or to the consensus of contemporary Muslim scholars. In modernist Islamic discussions, it can also refer to some type of democratic system that represents the views and needs of a Muslim community.

[22] *Sunnah* refers to the body of traditional social and legal custom and practice of the early Islamic community in general, but specifically referring to the actions, habits, customs, and words of the Prophet Muhammad. These words were later specifically systematised and recorded in the *ḥadīth* collections.

debated the validity and ethics of *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*[23], and *tafsīr*[24] for a few tense minutes but then eventually agreed to disagree on the matter.

The interaction above illustrates the highly charged debates about the truth claims and assumptions, as well as the contemporary applicability and ethics, of various modern, 'traditional' and 'neo-traditional' schools of Islamic thought and practice. The term 'traditional' or 'orthodox' school of *fiqh* is used in this thesis to refer specifically to the four most followed schools (*madhhab*) of *fiqh* in Sunni practice (Ḥanafīh, Mālikī , Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī), the two main Shī'i schools of *fiqh* (Ja'fari and Zaydīyah), as well as the Ibadi school present in Oman. These schools of *fiqh* share several basic ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions which differentiate them from both 'neo-traditional' schools as well as the Progressive Muslim school of thought.

I borrow the term 'neo-traditional' for Salafism and Wahhabism and related schools of Islamic thought from Adis Duderija's classification of modern Islamic theology (2011: 49). They are 'neo-traditional' in the sense that they aim to revive and return to tradition by rejecting obedience (*taqlīd*) to the traditional schools of *fiqh*, which they sometimes consider

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[23] *Ḥadīth* refers to the collections of reported sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad. It is used as a major source of religious law and moral guidance as well as one of the primary tools to interpret the meaning of Qur'anic verses. The six canonical collections of *ḥadīth* for Sunnis were compiled starting from the 3rd century of the Muslim calendar, i.e., the ninth century CE. While the Shī'i compilations emerged around a century later with the first being Abū Ja'far al-Qulīnī's *Kāfī fī ʿilm al-dīn*. For more information on the history, function, and debates around *ḥadīth* consult Brown (2009).

[24] Qur'anic commentary or exegesis. *Tafsīr* refers to this genre of Muslim literature but also to the science of the processes of interpretation itself, i.e., hermeneutics. There were sharp disagreements amongst early Muslims about the techniques that can be used to interpret the meaning of the Qur'an ranging from a focus on external literal analyses (*ẓāhir*) to metaphorical and hidden meaning (*bāṭin*), or from the need for interpretations to prioritise reason (Mu'tazilah) to accepting the literal meaning *Bi-lā Kayf* (without asking or knowing 'how' or needing it to conform to human reason) of verses. Eventually by the tenth century there was a broad consensus within Sunni Islam on the set of methods and assumptions that should be used for the systematic study of Qur'anic exegesis known as *ʿilm al-tafsīr.* The most well-known of the earliest traditional *tafsīr* was the one compiled by al- Ṭabarī (d. 923). Producing new *tafsīr* literature has become an important tool for modern revivalists as well as progressive Muslims. For more information on this topic refer to the edited volume by Andrew Rippin on the emergence and development of the Muslim exegetical tradition (1988a).

to be illegitimate innovations (*bid'ah*). This school of thought and associated movements are 'neo' as they are modern phenomena and emerge from a reaction to modernity and modernist Islamic reform and practices. Like Progressive Muslims they also seek revolutionary change in the status quo of traditional Islamic practice and beliefs but the direction of their change is not to 'move with the times or move forward' but to 'return back' to a time of 'uncorrupted' Islam during the time of the Prophet and the first two generations following that (Duderija 2011: 47). But the articulation of truth claims is not a matter of verbal debate alone but has consequences and impacts on all facets of people's lives. The following case study demonstrates how the contestations over Islamic discourse and practice can have broad-ranging and painful impacts on those involved.

2.1. WHEN THE DEBATE GETS UGLY

Sheikh Usama Hasan used to lead the Islamic studies and research unit at the 'counter-extremism' think tank, Quilliam, during the period of my fieldwork. He grew up in the Leyton district in the Waltham Forest borough of North-East London, a majority BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) area (London Borough of Waltham Forest 2022), where he and his family members had been the trustees and *imāms* of the 'Masjid al-Tawhid' mosque. He served as a part-time *imām* at this community-based, Salafi-oriented mosque for twenty years until an online campaign was initiated against him in 2011 that sought to remove him from the mosque he had grown up and worked in his whole life (Muslim Institute 2012). The reason for this campaign of opposition, and often intense hostility and harassment, was the gradual shift in his beliefs regarding the Islamic stance on evolution, hijab, *jihād*[25] and secular democracy, and

[25] Since this term is commonly used in contemporary English, I will hereafter not use Arabic transliteration or italicise it.

his highly public confrontation and condemnation of militant extremist ideologies within some segments of the Muslim communities.

During one of my interviews with him, he stated that he is driven by his 'Islamic duty' for waging the 'greater jihad of personal struggle to become a better Muslim and the lesser jihad of challenging injustices in society and guiding people towards the "straight path"'[26] (Hasan, personal communication, 24 January 2017). Sheikh Hasan comes from a prominent family of religious activists and scholars associated with well-known leaders of the transnational networks facilitated by the Pakistani-based *Jamaat-i-Islami* and *Ahl-i-Ḥadīth* groups, but also linked later by Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood, and Saudi and other Arab Salafi groups. Therefore, Sheikh Hasan's position within a network of Islamic activists and scholars provides him with potentially powerful resources to employ for establishing himself as a source of authoritative interpretations and practices of Islam.

In response to the campaign against him, Sheikh Hasan addressed the mosque to clarify his positions, but the gathering ended up in raucous arguments and some members of the gathering accused him of being outside the fold of Islam (*murtid*). Later a minority of the mosque's trustees voted to relieve him of his duties as a trustee and an *imām* of the mosque and in the process excluded him, his father, and supporters. Thus, not only was Sheikh Hasan and his family ousted from the Leyton mosque administration but also a rival faction took control over it.

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[26] The Arabic term *jihad* is another highly contested term but is usually translated as 'struggle' or 'striving'. There are *ḥadīth* traditions that describe *jihad* as a process that takes place at two levels: the inner (greater) struggle within oneself to avoid sinful behaviours and follow the principles and practices of Islam and the outer (lesser) struggle referring to the defense of the Muslim community under attack. What exactly constitutes these two struggles is a topic of contestation. For instance, are Muslims only allowed to take up arms when they are under direct attack or can they be more proactive in their defensive strategies? Progressive Muslims primarily interpret the term as nonviolent political action, civil engagement, and internal struggle for self-improvement, knowledge, and self-actualization. See Esack (1997), Ramadan (2017), and Wadud (2006) for the different approaches to the concept of jihad within progressive Muslim discourses.

Sheikh Hasan's struggle was, arguably, not just limited in significance to a local power struggle for control over a mosque but represented broader contestations about the role and nature of Islam and Muslims in Britain (Khan & McMahon 2016). Predictably, given the intense media focus on controversies related to Islam, a broader media and public debate arose around this event concerning Muslim interactions with 'British values', social institutions, and politics, i.e., the politicised and highly fraught concerns about integration, security, racism, Islamophobia, human rights, science, and terrorism (BBC News 2011; Davis 2011; Salman 2011).

On the other hand, emotive concerns were raised about the impact of British and secular institutions and culture on the integrity and survival of Islam and the rights of Muslims to freely believe and practise their religion (Boriqee 2011). This chain of events elicited passionate debates that were covered extensively by mainstream and Muslim media, precisely because they touched on sensitive and critical broader socio-political questions and conflicts about both the nature of contemporary Islam and Britain (Beth n.d.; Do you think this imam realizes now that Islam is the religion of peace? 2011; Perrott 2011). In short, the debate brought into the public eyes—the public including mainstream Muslim communities too—an approach to Islam that is advocated by Progressive Muslims. Which raises the question: what is the Progressive Muslim approach to Islam and how is it distinct from other Islamic approaches, practices, and communities?

2.2. PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS: WHAT IS IN A TERM?

Although I use the term 'progressive Muslim' to identify my interlocutors for the purpose of this thesis, my interlocutors themselves primarily use it as an analytical term rather than as a personal or communal identity label in their daily lives. Similarly, the term 'progressive

Muslim' is often used by Muslim theologians, scholars, and activists for analyses and for categorisations at a theoretical level rather than as a self-identifying label. Hence, the term is often used as an etic[27] analytical and identity term referring to certain communities and types of 'liberal' and/or 'critical' Muslims by both other Muslims and non-Muslims, even when those communities themselves do not employ it primarily as an emic identity term.

However, despite this term not functioning as a prominent identity marker for most of my interlocutors, a few other Muslim organisations, communities, and individuals do indeed self-identify as 'progressive' Muslims (Duderija 2010). The identity 'progressive' Muslim is salient and meaningful for them in their daily lives rather than just a term they employ for analytical purposes or one they view as an etic term other people use for them. The use of the term 'progressive Muslim' as a personal and/or communal identifier seems more commonly employed in North America compared to the UK.[28] Overall, there are no shared or consistent identity labels used by my interlocutors to refer to the *type* of Muslim they are, and they do not form a single, clearly demarcated, and distinct Islamic community.

Given this diversity, contestations, and lack of a defined community identity or ideology that defines this topic, is there a distinct sociological and theological phenomenon that can be identified as 'progressive' Islam? If so, how can this approach to Islam be

[27] Etic refers to terms, concepts, and explanations that are 'outsiders' accounts of the interlocutors' world rather than the 'emic' perspectives which are based on the terms and perspectives used by the interlocutors themselves. Interlocutors' worldviews can be understood and described using their 'emic' accounts, but 'etic' accounts add another layer to the analysis which do not rely only on the perspectives and understanding of the interlocutors but can utilise other frameworks, assumptions, perspectives, and knowledge (that may be 'outside' the framework that the interlocutors prefer or are grounded in) to understand the nature of the interlocutors' beliefs and behaviours.

[28] For instance, one of the oldest liberal Muslim organisations in the USA is named 'Muslims for Progressive Values' (MPV). They often use the term 'progressive Muslim' in their literature as well as within their own communities as an emic term of personal and communal identity (Muslims for Progressive Values n.d.). Similarly, some North American Muslim academics and theologians also self-identify as 'progressive Muslims': for example, see the edited volume by Safi (2003a).

studied? Similarly, how can the Muslim communities that advocate and practise it be described and understood? One of the purposes of this thesis is to make the case that 'progressive Islam' and associated Muslim communities not only exist as distinct sociological and theological phenomena but that they can also be productively studied. In fact, I claim that they are valuable for a nuanced understanding of contemporary Muslims due to their interventions that attempt creative Islamic reworkings of issues that have come to represent ideological, theological, ethical, political, and sociological 'fault-lines' between Muslim and non-Muslim (specifically those categorised as 'Western'). Whether these interventions represent valid 'bridges' to the perceived political, ideological, and theological disjuncture is a matter that is being actively debated among all concerned parties, which makes them valuable as a case study.

To an extent all contemporary Muslim thought—and hence the communities and identities that emerge from these schools of thought—is an admixture of concepts, techniques, and ethics emerging from both pre-modern Islamic history and modern intellectual developments. But what divides 'progressive' Muslims from other Muslim communities and schools of thought is both the *extent* to which the dominant concepts, ethics, and techniques of Enlightenment, scientific method, and postmodernism are engaged and incorporated in their frameworks and the *nature* of this engagement. Overall, the nature of their engagement is, on balance, tilted more towards active elaboration and reworking of these modern and postmodern ideologies within an Islamic framework rather than either an active resistance through developing an Islamic counter-narrative or a retreat from engaging with them. Therefore, Progressive Muslims engage critically with the basic ontological/theological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions present in Islamic

disciplines like *kalām*[29]*, usūl al-fiqh*[30]*, tafsīr, taṣawwuf* (Sufism), *hadīth*, and Muslim history in the light of contemporary knowledge, techniques, and ethical concepts and concerns. Thereby, they claim to reconstruct, reform, and revive what they view as the authentic spirit of Islam, one which is vibrant and constantly evolving to meet the needs of Muslims.

Through my ethnographic work I try to understand how Progressive Muslims engage with discourses and practices emerging from distinct, and often contradictory, ideologies: for instance, theism, enlightenment modernism, and postmodernism. Consequently, the views expressed under the umbrella of 'progressive Islam' can be extremely varied and, sometimes, contradictory. Diversity and contradiction are features of all discursive structures and communities to a certain degree, and scholars of Islam have made the case that this is particularly or essentially the case for Islam (Ahmed 2016; Bauer 2021), but since Progressive Muslims lack any centralised or established authority structures and place a high value on diversity these features are even more pronounced. Currently, Progressive Islam includes distinct tendencies—either more enlightenment modernist or postmodernist oriented—that may take different pathways and identities if the communities and the associated discursive structures become more established. Regardless of this diversity, there is a shared focus on the concepts of wellbeing and harm through an Islamic perspective that is critical of both secular and theological discourses, practices, and structures that result in harm. This often translates to theological and activist discourses and practices that can be

[29] *Kalām* refers to the discipline of Islamic theological philosophy that is influenced by the techniques and reasoning of Hellenic philosophy—for instance, dialectical reasoning—to guide theological inquiry. There are different historical schools of *kalām* with the *Ahl al-Kalām* being a forerunner of the Mu'tazilah school as it foregrounded reason as the primary tool for interpreting Revelation and rejected the authority of *ḥadīth* when it contradicted reason (Brown 1996).

[30] The methods and principles used to make jurisprudential claims. Hence, this is a discipline that has a large role in laying the epistemological framework of different schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*).

placed on the far-left of the political spectrum as they advocate a radical transformation of power relations towards liberatory and equality promoting arrangements.

2.3. CONCEPTUALISING MUSLIM SUBJECTIVITIES

To avoid framing all aspects of 'being Muslim' in relation to the Islamic discursive traditions in a straightforward manner, I will trace processes and practices that both evoke as well as diffuse 'the religious' at certain moments and in certain contexts, i.e., my interlocutors' subjectivities are constituted through multiple discourses. Furthermore, the concepts of 'progressive Islam' and 'progressive Muslims' are not only actively created by individual Muslims but are also constituted through social and historical processes that are beyond the conscious and deliberate attempts of individuals. In the terms defined by Shahab Ahmed, as elaborated below, the 'Con-Text' of Islamic discourse precedes the individual Muslim's meaning- and self-making practices (2016: 356). Crucially, for most of my interlocutors the socio-historical context of contemporary Britain facilitates and impedes the types of 'intellectual' or 'spiritual' practices of Islamic hermeneutics they can productively engage in to construct communities, identities, ethical systems, and political movements.

Furthermore, I aim to emphasise that the diversity and contestations within the spectrum of 'progressive Muslim' identity, discourse, and practice are a defining feature and a core value of this branch of Islamic thinking and Muslim practice[31]. The diversity reflects

[31] It is fair to state that diversity and contestation are a feature of all human communities and discursive structures. Furthermore, scholars of Islam have often noted that Islam, in particular, is distinctive in terms of the level of 'immense variety and diversity' in all aspects of its beliefs, values, and practice in its contemporary, and especially historical, manifestations (Ahmed 2016: 542; Bauer 2021). In fact, Muslim history is testament to the intense debates, and often violent battles, between Muslims that illustrate the wide range of beliefs, practices, and values associated with their religion (Hodgson 1974). However, each Islamic school of thought and practice varies in its exact position on this scale of internal diversity and the evaluative stance they take on the issue of 'diversity' and 'contradiction'. Progressive Muslims are higher on this scale than most other Islamic sub-traditions, and importantly, diversity is also one of the core values that is actively cultivated rather than viewed as a challenge to overcome.

its core values and goals rather than being indicative of a lack of a sociological and theological phenomenon with its own set of discourses, practices, and communities. This diversity and contestation is an essential feature of the nature of the discursive structure of Progressive Islam and the institutional structure of Progressive Muslim communities. Since this is one of the defining features and consequences of this theological and sociological phenomenon, it is ever-present in the lives of Progressive Muslims and is both perceived as unwelcome in certain contexts and as a deliberate and cherished ethical practice in other contexts.

To repeat the definition that I provided in Chapter 1, Progressive Muslims build frameworks of Islamic knowledge, ethics, and practices that incorporate and rework concepts, techniques, and values emerging from the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, and—more recently—Postmodernism and Poststructuralism.

2.4. HISTORICAL RESOURCES: THE DISCURSIVE LINEAGE OF PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

This active engagement with modern and postmodern discourses and practices does *not* imply that the Progressive Muslim theology, ethics, and practices are entirely 'new' and purely a reaction to the emergence of modernity. Instead, Progressive Muslims continue to develop theological debates and concepts that have defined the nature of Muslim intellectual and Progressive landscape since the foundation of the *ʾummah* (Duderija 2011: 128).[32] Muslim communities have continuously debated—sometimes violently—basic questions of creed (*ʿaqīda*) and practice such as: who leads Muslim communities; how the leadership of

[32] The concept of *ʾummah*, as well as the term 'Muslim', has been a heavily contested concept and definitions have ranged from very narrow ones referring to only a single Muslim sub-group to all-encompassing ones that include all of humanity, depending on the theological and political beliefs involved (Noor 2003).

Muslim communities is selected; how can a Muslim believer be defined; what is the nature of the Qur'ān and how can its meaning be understood; how can we know what is moral and desirable to Allah; and what is Allah's nature and reality? These debates have defined the doctrines, practices, identities, and delineated the boundaries of various Muslim communities and have always been linked to the political structures and contestations of their times. In the first few centuries of Islam, these debates were active, creative, and lively due to the broader epistemological stances available but over the centuries through the extensive work of Muslim scholars and the political and popular patronage of certain schools of thought the boundaries and content of many of these questions became increasingly settled and policed and distinct religious authority structures were established in Muslim communities (Watt 1973).

Progressive Muslims claim that they are reviving and re-opening concepts and practices within the Islamic discursive tradition that were repressed, or remained marginal, due to political and other reasons over the span of Islamic history, but which can now provide authentic and ethical Islamic answers to the greatest challenges and conflicts faced by contemporary Muslim communities. One historical influence that is often mentioned in this context is the eighth- and ninth-century (CE) Muʿtazilite school of theology. It is often referred to as an important historical precursor for Progressive Muslim theology by both Progressive Muslim academics and theologians as well as by the activists and lay people within Progressive Muslim communities (Safi 2003a).

One of the defining features of Progressive Islam is the primacy given to reason (and concomitantly modern philosophical—particularly epistemological—discourses and scientific knowledge and methods) for interpreting Revelation, especially as it relates to

Muslim theology (*ʻaqīda*), worship (ʻ*ibādah*), ethics (*akhlāq/adab*), social relations (*muʿāmalāt*), and law (*fiqh*) (Duderija 2011: 156). Similarly, one of the ways Muʿtazilite theology differentiated itself from the other theological schools of its time was with its claim that reason (and *kalām*) is the primary guide to interpreting Revelation.[33] Progressive Muslims also develop Muʿtazilite moral philosophy which saw reason as a crucial tool to reach moral truths *independent* of Revelation. Muʿtazilites saw morality as objectively and universally explicable rather than necessarily requiring commitment to the Islamic faith or a suspension of reason or personal conscience, i.e., 'God commands it because it is right'.

Their rival theological school, the *Ahl al-hadīth*, claimed that human reason is incapable of comprehending God's nature and commandments, and cannot be relied on as it is imperfect and often driven by conflicting and self-serving desires. They criticised metaphorical interpretations (*ta'wīl*) of the Qurʾān, which was one of the methods the Muʻtazilite employed for interpreting verses that seemed to contradict reason, evidence, experience, or moral principles. Followers of the *Ahl al-ḥadīth* also stressed the previously mentioned concept of *Bi-lā Kayf*, i.e., accepting the literal meaning of the Revelation without questioning why or how. Hence, they viewed moral truths as 'right because God commands it so'(Vasalou 2016: 4). Furthermore, like the Muʿtazilite school, Progressive Muslims take a critical approach to the study and applicability of the *ḥadīth* collections and focus on whether the content (*matn*) of the *ḥadīth* fits with the logic of the Qurʾān rather than accepting the traditional chains of transmission (*isnād*) epistemology.

[33] Revelation includes The Qur'an, Sunnah, as well as the (multi-) uni-verse itself. The Cosmos itself is sometimes viewed by progressive Muslims as part of God's Revelation and, hence, understanding its nature through science, philosophy, and mystical practise is also considered a way to reach God's Truth and Message. For instance, see Tariq Ramadan's take on the scientific enterprise and environmentalism (2008). These ideas are often expressed by referring to Sufi concepts like Ibn Arabi's concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Divine Unicity), or referring to Nature as a Sign (*āyat*) from Allah (Chittick 1989; Mesbahi 2012).

The Muʿtazilite school of theology was popular and influential in the ninth century and became the official state doctrine under the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn. Eventually, partly due to the violent political imposition of Mu'tazilite doctrine by the caliph (the *Miḥna*) and due to the popularity of counter-ideologies, Mu'tazilah beliefs were largely replaced by the four schools of Sunni Islamic *fiqh*, although elements of Mu'tazilite theology continued to be strong among Zaydī and Twelver Shī'i.[34] The Traditionalists or the *Ahl al-Hadīth* school that opposed the use of rationalistic philosophy formed the basis of Ḥanbalī *fiqh*, and later influenced the Wahhabi and Salafi theology.

These debates between the two early schools of theology led to the establishment of the most dominant Sunni theological schools by the tenth century: the Ash'arī and Māturīdī traditions of theology. These did not completely reject the categories and methods of Hellenistic theological philosophy (*kalām*) or reason (*'aql*) but employed them essentially to supplement the beliefs of the *Ahl al-Hadīth*. They accepted the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* as ultimate and foremost authorities in all knowledge and ethics but, to varying degrees, also included limited reliance on rationalistic arguments and tools for assistance with the interpretation of Revelation. Ḥanafīh jurisprudence is closely linked to Māturīdī theology, while Ash'arī theology influenced the Mālikī and Shāfiʿī schools of jurisprudence (Watt 1973, 1985). Hence, these early theological debates and conflict were the crucible within which the contemporary dominant Islamic schools of *fiqh* emerged.

Even though the Mut'azilite lost influence by the tenth century, their legacy continued in a more constrained manner through the continued importance of *ijtihād*, i.e.,

[34] Shī'ism adopted from the Mu'tazilah the concept of the freedom of the human will and the capacity of human reason to know good and evil, although this importance of reason and *ijtihād* was primarily restricted to the *Imāms*, and through them the *mujtahids*, who are believed to have the ability to discern the hidden and true meaning of the Revelation.

reason-based efforts in *fiqh* and *kalām*, in the traditional Sunni and Shīʻi *madhhab* (legal schools). Wael Hallaq, scholar of Islamic intellectual history, traced how the increasing authority of the established *madhhabs* from the tenth century onwards led to an emphasis on *taqlīd*[35] and a reduction in *ijtihād*. However, reason-based inquiry was never constrained to an extent where it would be accurate to claim that there was a 'closure of the gates of *ijtihād'*(Hallaq 2001: 62). Instead, *ijtihād* was practised 'within the hermeneutical contours of the school', while 'independent *ijtihād'*, which creates new legal schools with their own methodologies and foundational assumptions, was increasingly proscribed (2001: 63).

The challenges to these established schools of theology and jurisprudence remained relatively marginal until the emergence of revivalist Islam, i.e., Wahhabism, in mid-eighteenth century Nejd (Nahouza 2018). These challenges escalated from the mid-nineteenth century onwards with the disruption posed to established Muslim discourses by the violent and politically costly encounter with Western Enlightenment and scientific knowledge and technologies. The challenge posed by these new concepts, values, technologies, and knowledge resulted in the emergence of early modernist Islamic theology and *fiqh*, represented by theologians like Muhammad Abduh in Al-Azhar University, Rashid Rida, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (De Bellaigue 2017). These modernist theologians, also sometimes referred to as neo-Muʿtazilite (and Salafis by some) due to their emphasis on reason, emerged in all major Muslim contexts, including highly influential movements in

[35] *Taqlīd* refers to the practice of following legal precedent and accepting the methodology and doctrine of a legal school. There is a wide range of opinions about the nature and validity of *taqlīd* within Muslim legal schools. For instance, whether it involves blind obedience or allows the circumscribed exercise of reason. What are the limits of this exercise of reason? To what extent is *taqlīd* ethical? Does *taqlīd* only apply to laypeople or scholars? Does *taqlīd* apply to all religious experts to the same degree?

South Asia (Metcalf 1982), which had a large impact on how Muslims understood and practised their religion.

Together with these modernist Islamic thinkers, another revivalist Salafism—sometimes also called Wahhabism which is a term the followers of this approach consider inaccurate—also developed and spread. They advocate retrieving accurate knowledge about the values, lifestyles, and social arrangements cultivated by the Prophet and his companions, which they view as representing the model for all Muslims that applies to all times and contexts. Both the modernist and Salafi responses represent a modern challenge to the traditional orthodox schools of *fiqh* as they promote individual engagement with Islamic texts, albeit in different ways. While the Salafi approach stressed the need for a rational purification of all innovation in the Islamic tradition (*bidʿah*) by directly engaging with the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* in a literal and rigorous manner, the modernist approach promoted the same individual reason-based engagement with the Islamic tradition but with an effort to harmonise them with science (positivism), modernity, and Enlightenment values[36].

As Thomas Bauer observes, 'In reaction to the Western challenge, two discourses evolve in the Islamic world, an Islamist one and a Western "liberal" one. At first sight they appear opposed to each other, but they have one and the same basis' (2021: 184). The 'reformist' and 'liberal' Muslims, who trace their lineage to the Muʿtazilite school with its rigorous and rationalist epistemology, fit well with the core epistemological features of Western modernity—fear of ambiguity, obsession with truth, and the ambition of

[36] I use the term 'Enlightenment Values' to refer to the range of rationalist humanistic philosophical frameworks for ethics emerging from The Enlightenment intellectual movement, like utilitarianism and deontology, and the specific values that were claimed as 'ends' in these philosophical frameworks: freedom, happiness, progress, fairness, tolerance, plurality, scepticism, empiricism, and equality (Outram 2005; Pinker 2019: 10). These values and ideals became rallying cries for the political and intellectual revolutions that defined the American, French, Haitian, and later national and post-colonial revolutions (Carey & Festa 2009; Goodman 1994).

universalization. While the early Sunni schools' consolidation in opposition to the Muʿtazilites resulted in more ambiguous, contradictory, and plural discourses. Hence, as a reaction to Western imperialism and orientalist discourses on the primitive, irrational, and sinful nature of Muslim societies contemporary Muslim discourses and practices—whether they are considered traditional, revivalist, or progressive—have shifted and internalised the hegemonic Western modern episteme.

On the other hand, the large scale and fast-paced changes in Western norms, values, and assumptions—sometimes categorised as 'post-modernity'—has resulted in a historical amnesia where several Victorian-era legal, social, moral, and ideological norms and values that have displaced pre-modern Muslim subjectivities are now considered essentially 'Islamic' and a sign of a lack of modernity. A large scholarly literature traces how since the so-called Middle Ages the socio-political concept of the 'West' has relied on the Muslim 'Other' to both consolidate the 'Self' as well as justify imperialistic agendas both during colonial times and contemporary ones. Within this process of constructing a racialised 'Other', discourses on sexuality and gender have always played a visceral, intimate, and efficacious role (Bauer 2021: 100; Bhattacharyya 2008; Puar 2017; Sabsay 2012; Said 1979).

Contemporary Progressive Muslim thought has built upon, and re-worked, the project of modernist Islam of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries by incorporating postmodern critiques of The Enlightenment and modernity while still largely retaining science, reason, progress, and humanism as central values (Duderija 2011). This leads to Progressive Muslim thought and practice emphasising diversity and pluralism at all levels; the personal and private being as central aspects of public politics; questioning 'progress' being defined as economic growth; and extending the remit of ethics from one entirely

privileging humans ('humanism') to one that incorporates other beings and living systems ('environmentalism'). Hence, Progressive Muslim thought varies internally, with some stressing more 'modern', and others more 'postmodern' orientations with the latter launching a more radical Islamic critique of dominant modes of 'knowing' and 'governing' while the former aligning more with contemporary 'liberal' and 'secular' logics. .

2.5. ISLAM FROM THE INTELLECT AND THE HEART: TOWARDS A THEORY OF ISLAMIC MEANING-MAKING

I aim to understand how Progressive Muslims, both the ordinary people as well as those who facilitate and guide them, use not just rational hermeneutics that typify modernist approaches to Islam but also various approaches falling under the broad category of the spiritual. Jeremy Carrette explores the concept of 'spirituality' as it is employed within Foucault's corpus and claims that for Foucault this word did not refer to any metaphysical concept of 'a spirit,' but instead a particular 'mode of self-formation' that merges politics, ethics, and spirituality (2002: 138). It is a type of ethical self-transformation which is not dictated by moral rules or codes but situated 'practices of freedom' that involve 'modes of being' that are embodied and transgress rational and conscious thought. Hence, he specifically intended to contrast spirituality with the Cartesian body/soul dualism which privileges reason as the primary source of truth and knowledge within modern epistemology. Foucault claimed that ancient societies conceived of philosophy and spirituality, or knowledge and ethical self-transformation, as 'identical or nearly identical' (1997: 294).

Spirituality includes 'political spirituality' which involves ethical self-transformations that emerge from a holistic way of life, involving not just reason but the entire body with its emotions, sensations, self-awareness, movements, and states of health and consciousness. He saw this as an exit strategy from the power/knowledge regimes of modernity that form rational

autonomous individuals unable to link ethics with power/knowledge. For instance, he highlights the concept of *parrhēsia* as a type of practice of 'political spirituality' as it involves the speaker using their freedom to choose to frankly speak the truth, even if it does not make rational sense for the speaker to do so as it puts them in danger, but they are driven by an embodied sense of moral duty that trumps self-interest (Foucault 2001: 12). Hence, *parrhēsia* requires cultivating of ethical virtues through bodily practices, like increasing tolerance for affective states of fear and self-examination.

The African-American scholar and activist bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) makes a similar argument to Foucault's when she argues that 'progressive politics,' must link truth and knowledge with ethical self-transformations that transcends reason as the primary political motivation (2006). Instead, she locates a liberatory political ethos in an affective state: love. Practices of self-care that cultivate embodied affective experiences of love for self and others then motivate ethical and political behaviours.

Similar primacy given to the affective domain was also evident in the religious discourses in some of the Progressive Muslim circles I worked with where the emphasis was on cultivating inner embodied states of love, mercy, compassion, and empathy as spiritual practices that would then allow the practitioner to connect to Allah and act ethically. In bell hooks' model true liberation is beyond the pull and push of dominance and resistance, but can only occur through embodied practices of self-awareness such as mindfully processing bodily and psychic states of pain, and through actions like cultivating a feeling of belonging and empathy with others through acts of service:

> The moment we choose love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate

> ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom (hooks 2006: 298).

My interlocutors also approach meaning making through personal hermeneutical engagements with Islam. This approach can be analysed through Ahmed's conceptualisation of Islam as: Human meaning-making within the parameters set by socio-historical contexts involving 'hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation to Muhammad' (2016: 363). By Text he means the scriptures or primary texts that are viewed by Muslims as either direct words of God or directly inspired by the Divine Source, i.e., the Qur'ān and the *hadīth*. He argues that for Muslims the structure of the Revelatory act links the Text to the Pre-Text: 'The Text of the Revelation requires as its premise an Unseen Reality or Truth that lies beyond and behind the Text of the Revelation-in-the-seen and upon which the act, Text and truth of Revelation are contingent' (2016: 346). This Pre-Text can be understood as the reality of God that is ontologically prior and alethically (concerning truth) larger than the Text.

Ahmed argues that there isn't a disagreement about this for the believers in the Revelation to Muhammad but historically Muslims have disagreed about 'whether and in what degree and by what mechanisms the Truth of the Pre-Text of Revelation may be accessed' (2016: 347)? Hence, the question often is whether Muslims can only access the Pre-Text in the Text; via the Text; or can be known without the Text. These also involve questions about the nature of the Pre-Text and what aspect of Reality can be approached to reveal the knowledge of the Pre-Text.

He refers to the hermeneutical engagements of pre-modern Islamic philosophers (*ḥukamah*) and the Sufi[37] traditions (*taṣawwuf*) with the Pre-Text for meaning making for the Self through which they sought to understand the Text. While both were examples of hermeneutical engagement with the Pre-Text of Revelation that formed the basis of their projects of ethical self-formation which they considered essential for achieving insights into aspects of Divine Truth, their primary epistemological mode for achieving this goal were different: for the philosophers it was reason (*'aql*) while for the Sufis it was the personal embodied experiences that are the basis of human existence or consciousness-in-the-body, specifically experiences of *kashf* (personal, subjective, embodied, and existential apprehensions of The Divine).

Finally, the Con-Text of Revelation is 'the body of meaning…that have been produced in the course of the human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation and which are thus already present as Islam' (2016: 356). Con-Text can be considered the 'vocabulary of Islam' at any given moment and place available to an actor, usually a Muslim, for an act or utterance to not only be recognised as Islam but also serve to construct and constitute meaning for the Self. Hence, a Muslim necessarily lives in Con-Text, and it is only through the Con-Text can they undertake the task of meaning making with the Text and Pre-Text of the Revelation. In this way the Con-Text is the built structure of meaning that exists prior to an individual and sets the parameters of their hermeneutical engagements without determining its direction. Therefore, the acts of hermeneutical engagement with the multi-

[37] Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) refers to the strand of Islam where esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an and ascetic-mystical practices and experiences are central to Muslim meaning-making and ethical conduct. This stream in Islam emerged from the very early stage of the religion and has taken a wide variety of forms resulting in a wide spectrum of opinions and conceptions regarding the category of Sufism. For a detailed look at the debates around Sufism and its history, politics, philosophy, and practices see Alexander Knysh's *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (2017).

spatial dimensions of Revelation may begin with the Con-Text that already exists in a given time and space but involves a mutually-constructing relationship between the self of the individual, the social or collective Self, and Islam. Islam is conceptualised here as both the *means* used for meaning making as well as the *meaning* derived from the process of meaning making. Ahmed explains that it makes theoretical sense to begin with the question 'What is Islam?', rather than 'What is a Muslim?', because the field of meaning that forms the Con-Text always precedes the Muslim, 'even though the Islam whence the Muslim begins may be different to the Islam where he or she ends up' (2016: 362)

I will utilise Ahmed's conceptualisation of 'Islam' as I believe it avoids the culturalist reductionism of Islam as anything that Muslims say or do, or essentialist conceptualisations of Islam containing specific beliefs and practices. Furthermore, Asad's conceptualisation of Islam emphasising only 'Text'—especially the Qur'ān and *hadīth* —as the ground upon which the discursive tradition known as *Islam* is constructed with its aim of establishing orthodoxy and orthopraxy (and hence the boundaries of a community) is not well suited for understanding Progressive Muslim discourses and practices that are *not* primarily concerned with hermeneutics of the Text or prescriptive. While Asad's conceptualisation of Islam as a discursive tradition is a productive analytical strategy that brings together meaning-making and community-making, Ahmed's reconceptualising of the Revelation to Muhammad as a 'multi-dimensional' phenomenon that is not limited to Texts or always aspiring to establish orthodoxy and orthopraxy, helps highlight other modes of hermeneutical engagements that construct and constitute Progressive Muslim subjectivities.

This conceptualisation of Islam with—what he calls—an expanded 'spatiality of Revelation' places contradictions firmly within the structure and nature of Islam, and hence

within Islamic projects of ethical self-cultivation or piety. Contradictions can be viewed as a *feature* of Islam rather than always requiring an 'extrinsic' explanation that assumes it is a flaw that emerges either from some lack of rationality and knowledge of Islam, or from rational or irrational decision-making to fulfil needs for power, status, or resources. Contradictions are not just inherently Islamic but also 'coherently Islamic: contradictions inheres to and coheres with the spatial-structural dynamic of Revelation to Muhammad' (Ahmed 2016: 366).

While I will be highlighting the contradictions and ambiguities in my interlocutors' approaches to Islamic meaning-making it is crucial to keep in mind that the modern literate context within which they operate the dominant tendency is towards a rational, textual, and coherent approach to Islam. While this is one of the core changes incurred through 'modernism' in Islamic discourses and practices it is in no way an essential or stable aspect of the discursive tradition. In fact, premodern Islamic discourse and practice was marked by a 'culture of ambiguity' with an unproblematised lack of clarity or a division of secular and religious (Bauer 2021). Hence, although I highlight the dominant Progressive Muslim approach of excavating meaning through Islamic texts and the importance given to reason I also show that, despite this dominant tendency, other modes of Progressive Muslim meaning-making still exist that not only recognise the contradiction and ambiguity of Islam but considers it a virtue or an advantage rather than a problem to be worked out.

Similarly, Ahmed explores how within the history of Islam God's purpose and Truth were also explored by Muslims within Pre-Text and Con-Text dimensions even in ways when these dimensions were categorised as having higher Truth-value than the Text. Ahmed writes that his 'fundamental point' is that Muslims experienced 'dis-rupted continuities' in their encounters with modernity where they 'moved decisively away from conceiving of and

living normative Islam as hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation, and have, instead, begun conceiving of and living normative Islam primarily as hermeneutical engagement with Text of Revelation' (Ahmed 2016: 515). Therefore, Ahmed claims that the 'default' conceptualisation of Islam, especially by Islamic scholars, in the contemporary era is one of 'legal discourse,' where most other aspects of Islam are marginalised or 'altogether excluded' (2016: 117).

As mentioned earlier most Progressive Muslim theologians, academics, activists, and lay Muslims also primarily engage with hermeneutics of the textual sources of Islam (Text and Con-Text) with the aim of advancing inclusive readings that are then used to formulate new practices and socio-legal frameworks. Hence, the primary mode with which Progressive Muslims engage with Islam tends to be textual and legalistic and is aimed towards promoting ethics, which are also understood in the legalistic register of human rights, i.e., it is a project of legal reform. The emphasis on texts and reason within Progressive Muslim milieux can lead to the marginalisation of other modes of approaching the Revelation of Muhammad that are also simultaneously present in the way many Progressive Muslims construct themselves *as* Muslims.

For instance, mystical Sufi practices that focus less on thoughts and reasoning and more on sensations; body movements; meditative practices; states of altered consciousness; affective experiences; or aesthetic, creative, emotive, literary, or spiritual hermeneutical engagements with the 'multi-dimensional spatiality of Revelation'. I refer to these latter meditative, affective, and embodied Progressive Muslim modes of meaning-making as 'spiritual' while the textual, rational, legalistic approaches as 'intellectual'. It should be stressed that these are 'ideal types' used for analytical purposes and best understood as

working in tandem with the difference primarily being of *degree* and *direction* of approach, i.e., which approach is not only more frequently applied but assumes primacy in shaping the lens through which the other is engaged with.

Those interlocutors who viewed the spiritual approach as the primary lens that frames, elaborates, and constrains understanding of the Text, the Text-based knowledge of the Revelation was almost always *still* viewed as an essential complement to the spiritual approach. Reflecting Ahmed's claim that textuality and legalistic frames of Islam are hegemonic within modernity to an extent that even individuals and groups approaching the Revelation to Muhammad through alternative modes of knowing still feel the need to engage with the Text. Therefore, what differentiated the spiritual approach within Progressive Muslim spaces was the secondary status of textual hermeneutics in Islamic meaning-making. Instead, the core hermeneutical tools were affective, meditative, somatic, sensorial, and relational and these assumed primacy in shaping and guiding the direction and products of the intellect.

An example of this difference was the way the 'intellectual' approach in most Progressive Muslim spaces employed the language of reason as the primary epistemological tool that guides a Muslim's hermeneutical engagements with the Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of the Revelation. On the other hand, the spiritual approach in Progressive Muslim spaces employed the language of affect and relationality and prioritised embodied experiences and states over cognitive concepts as sources of sacred knowledge. The intellectual approach emphasised independent, individual reading of the Qur'ān that makes sense to the person, and a critical reading approach to the Con-Text, for instance *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*. Rational questioning and inquiry was stressed over the sources of *taqlīd* (abiding by the

legal consensus and precedent of a specific Islamic legal tradition). Reason was guided by hermeneutical tools that focus on ethics, which, of course, have affective and embodied elements but these were still viewed primarily as universal objective ethics, i.e., human dignity, rights, and well-being can be conceptualised in a universal and objective manner.

While the spiritual approaches would highlight affective experiential states, like love, as a hermeneutical lens for interpreting the text of the Qur'ān, and encourages cultivating embodied practices and phenomenological experiences that were interpreted or experienced as means and signs of connecting with 'divine Truth'. This would involve individually and communally cultivating spiritual practices through daily rituals, like *ṣalāh*, *dhikr*, fasting, self-inquiry (*taḥqīq*), and meditations that aimed to shape the Self so it is attuned to experience love as a form of Divine Truth and Meaning. Here knowledge of Allah is akin to a state of consciousness with an accompanying somatic affective experience of love that establishes communion, connection, or belonging with the sacred (usually labelled as Allah but some people used more general words like The Divine, Source, Truth, Light, etc.).

Therefore, even when the focus was on constructing rules of human conduct, ethics, and relationality, the 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' approaches differed in their hermeneutical modes which often translated to differences in the way power was conceptualised and operationalised within these approaches. The 'intellectual' Progressive Muslim approach ranged from discourses that were prescriptive and aimed towards a new orthodoxy with clear statements critiquing the 'incorrect' beliefs and practices of other contemporary discourses to discourses that also engaged with rational textual hermeneutics that specified correct and incorrect beliefs and practices but with a greater emphasis on there being a plurality of correct approaches. For instance, while the *imām* at the Muslim Education Centre of Oxford

(MECO) was passionate about offering a 'correct' Progressive Muslim critique of the dominant Islamic beliefs and practices, most *imāms* at the IMI emphasised that their textual hermeneutical approaches and the critiques that resulted from them were one alternative among a plurality of other legitimate approaches available in Muslim spaces in the UK.

On the other hand, in the Progressive Muslim spaces that could be considered primarily Spiritual in their approach the emphasis was less on categorising and analysing different beliefs and practices for their validity than on cultivating an intensely personal and embodied relationship to the Revelation and Allah which led to more subjective, experiential, and relative concepts of Divine Truth and Meaning. It bears mentioning that the Spiritual approach to the Revelation does not, and cannot, do away entirely with evaluations and judgments regarding 'correct' and 'incorrect' beliefs and practices as they form the basis for both ethics and knowledge, but the emphasis is more on an experiential basis for such evaluations rather than one based on applying the intellect to texts. For instance, the *imāms* at IMI would frequently encourage the congregation to 'listen to their hearts' as personal and collective *experiences* of distress and well-being are guides to the discovery of *ḥaqq* (Divine Truth).

2.6. ACADEMIC RESOURCES: BASIC PRECEPTS OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM THEOLOGY

Omid Safi's (2003a) edited volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* is one of the most influential academic and theological works on Progressive Islam. Safi gathered fourteen scholars, most of whom identify as Muslim themselves, to set out the terrain of what 'progressive Muslim' can mean in the contemporary world. Although Safi asserts in the introduction that the book is *not* meant to be 'a progressive Muslim manifesto',

during my fieldwork, my interlocutors referred to this book as one that they thought provides a good introduction to what it means to be a Progressive Muslim. Furthermore, I often heard the names and ideas of the contributors to this edited volume being mentioned in the conversations between my interlocutors. The volume makes some specific claims about what this identity or faith category could mean while acknowledging that one of the central values remains 'a wide spectrum of interpretations' of not just the sources of Islam but also the category of 'progressive Muslim' (Safi 2003b: 7).

Omid Safi defines the values of Progressive Muslims with reference to the Qur'ānic declaration that all humans have been created through God imbuing them with a part of His own *Rūḥ*, thereby imbuing Divine worth and equality to all humans (Qur'ān 15:29 and 38:72). For Progressive Muslims this is a core belief that underlies all human values and goals. Due to this aspect of human nature, all humans are equally sacred and possess the 'same intrinsic worth' regardless of their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or any other social, psychological, or biological differentiating or categorising factor. Therefore, the values and standards of evaluation that Progressive Muslims propose rely on this foundational belief in a universal human nature. They value and celebrate plurality in individual subjectivities and socio-cultural norms, while also claiming that certain values, rights, and needs underpin all human diversity due to the belief that all humans are created through the 'breath of God' being 'breathed into their beings'.

Khalid Abou el Fadl (2003), professor of Islamic law based in North America and one of the contributors to Safi's edited volume, explained that this focus on the universalism of certain moral imperatives and human rights is deliberately taken by Progressive Muslims to counter Muslim claims of moral relativism for laws and practices that violate human

rights, as defined by contemporary international norms. Abou el Fadl elaborated that the most common argument used to defend oppressive practices is to interpret moral and cultural relativism in a way that resists interrogating harmful or oppressive practices and traditions within one's own communities. This moral relativism is used to criticise the application of any universal idea of human rights and morality and, hence, is 'leveled against Muslim critics with feminist agendas, but also it has been utilized rather widely against Muslim intellectuals calling for self-critical re-evaluations post 9-11' (el Fadl 2003: 40).

He describes how the argument that Islam has its own unique set of standards for justice and righteousness that are not comprehensible by non-believers has been used to defend everything from 'the stoning and imprisoning of rape victims in Pakistan and Nigeria, the treatment of women by the Taliban,…the excommunication of writers in Egypt, and the killing of civilians in terrorist attacks' (el Fadl 2003: 34). He notes that much of the Qur'ānic discussion on values like justice, mercy, kindness, and generosity are predicated on the assumption of universal values (el Fadl 2003: 41). He concludes his article on what Progressive Muslims believe by stating that since the Qur'ān declares Islam to be a universal religion it makes no sense to declare that its values and norms only apply to a certain group of humanity, or that Islam's moral imperatives require a suspension of reason and conscience and a specific type of faith to be comprehensible. The ways these values express themselves in any specific context vary widely but the imperative to be guided by these values is universal.

Another contributor to the volume, Ahmet Karamustafa, a Muslim historian, considers this interface of universalism and pluralism in Progressive Muslim thought as fundamental to its conceptualisation of Islam. He states that the concept of 'religion' can be

misleading when applied to Islam as the concept gives 'the false impression that Islam is a distinct entity with clearly delineated borders' (Karamustafa 2003: 100). He describes how almost all aspects of Islamic belief, practices, and institutions are constantly in flux and variable. He also rejects the conflation of Islam and culture as completely overlapping as that would lead to the erroneous identification of a specific culture with Islam. Instead, he asserts that 'Islam is a transethnic, transnational, and transracial' project that is both global as well as adaptable (2003: 102). He believes that Islam can best be defined as a constantly evolving 'civilizational project' that is not linked to any specific culture, historical epoch, practices, or region but is a potentially endlessly malleable resource that humans use for various purposes (2003: 109).

Therefore, according to these Progressive Muslim academics and theologians, moral universalism in Islam is tied to celebrating human pluralism because of Allah's ability to make moral demands and judgments of humans based on the contexts of their behaviours and the consequences of their behaviours on human suffering and flourishing. These scholars view universalism and pluralism as Islamic moral values that apply to different aspects and levels of human behaviours, traits, and values. For instance, Scott Kugle, an Islamic theologian and Progressive Muslim activist based in the USA, describes Islam as a confessional and universal religion that celebrates the diversity that occurs in multiple domains of human reality (Kugle 2010). Specifically, he points to *Sūrah al-Hujurāt* (Q 49:13) which states:

> O people, We created you from a male and female, and We made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely, the most honourable among you

> in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is Knowledgeable, Ever-aware. (Yüksel et al. 2007: 327)

Kugle interprets this verse as encouraging believers to appreciate and respect diversity in genders, nations, and ethnicities because God deliberately created it for people to not only know but also to learn from each other. Kugle contrasts Qur'ānic verses with the Biblical interpretations that portray the 'Tower of Babel' account as a moral allegory on human (linguistic) diversity being a negative element of the world and a result of Divine punishment (Kugle 2003: 195).

For Kugle, the Qur'ān views diversity positively as a means for achieving more basic universal human needs and values. He highlights *Sūrah al-Rūm* (30:22) as another example of the Qur'ān mentioning diversity as a positive aspect of humanity. Kugle interprets the verse to mean that Allah deliberately created linguistic and other forms of diversity as 'a sign' of His existence and His mercy on humans. Hence, both the diversity of languages and the universal human rights and needs to acquire linguistic abilities, to express oneself, and to establish social bonds and feel connected with others are valued in the Qur'ān.

In short, according to these Progressive Muslim scholars, the basic precept of humanity's shared Divine nature and intrinsic equal worth guides Muslim moral action and judgment. This basic belief allows Progressive Muslims to pursue both those aspects of humanity that are centred on diversity, and others that reflect shared universal needs and values. This moral pursuit results in the emergence of three themes in contemporary Progressive Muslim politics: social justice, gender justice, and pluralism. These themes are reflective of, and reactive to, the broader questions and discussions that are prominent in

contemporary discourses, and the types of challenges and decisions Muslims are facing in their daily lives.

Although there are no conceptually neat boundaries defined by a sharp disjuncture between one contemporary Islamic school of thought and another[38] due to substantial overlap of history, practices, beliefs, and techniques, it is still possible to trace differing intellectual genealogies and the relative centrality of different ideologies (for instance, traditional Islamic, modernist enlightenment, postmodernist) in their frameworks. Many elements of Progressive Muslim beliefs and practices can look the same, or similar, to the traditional or neo-traditional ones, but examining their techniques of knowledge attainment (hermeneutic tools) and their reasons and ethics for engaging with them (the 'how and why' of their ideologies) helps to distinguish them from other schools of contemporary Islamic thought. In the next section I will explore these techniques and ideologies in more detail.

2.7. METHODOLOGICAL RESOURCES: THE HERMENEUTICS OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

As the sections above illustrate, Progressive Muslim is not just an identity marker for some Muslims, but also a designation for a set of specific beliefs and approaches to the Islamic tradition. These approaches span aspects of ritualistic practice, interpersonal norms and ethics, theological beliefs, and ontological assumptions. This section will focus on the epistemological assumptions and methodological tools (*manhaj*) that are characteristic of

[38] This statement describes the overlap of concepts and practices at the level of discursive analysis and their entangled histories but should not be read as a claim about how religious communities themselves experience and understand their beliefs and practices. For many Muslim communities their school of Islamic thought and practice does have clear boundaries that differentiate their community from other Muslim groups.

discourses produced by Progressive Muslim religious experts and academics[39]. The main devices used by these Progressive Muslim exegetes are: semantics (*māʿnā*), semiotic polyvalence, sociohistorical contextualization (*asbāb ul nuzūl*) and specification (*takhsīs al zamān wal makān*), abrogation *(naskh*), thematic holism (*mawḍūʿi*), ethicoreligious values and aim-based approaches (*qaṣd*), and a reason/rationality orientation (*ʾaql*) (Duderija 2011: 139).

Semantics (*māʿnā*) refers to finding the exact meaning of a term as used in seventh century Arabic, i.e., the way the language was used at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān. An instance of a problematic case is the word *fitnah.* The literal meaning of the word is 'heating to excess', 'melting', from which the metaphorical extensions such as a 'gruelling experience', 'great trial', 'catastrophe', and 'traumatic experience' are derived (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 692–693). But what exactly makes an experience or event fall within the category of *fitnah* is a matter of controversy. For instance, the term *fitnah* is used in the following two verses of the Qur'ān: 'And fight them until *fitnah* is no more, and religion is all for Allah. But if they cease, then Lo! Allah is Seer of what they do' (*Al Baqarah* 2: 193). The same is repeated in *Al-ʾanfāl* (8: 39). These verses are interpreted in different ways. For instance, *fitnah* is translated to mean 'unbelief or the rule of non-Muslims' by contemporary militant Islamist groups (Al-Ansari & Hasan 2018: 33), while many Progressive Muslims translate this term to mean the persecution and violation of the human rights and dignity of Muslims (Yüksel et al. 2007: 51).

[39] These theological and hermeneutical tools are also used by various other Islamic intellectual movements hence not unique to progressive Muslim discourses. The differences lie primarily in the *way* they are employed with these techniques taking precedence over other traditional approaches, used more extensively, and with aims and values that diverge from the ones that are given emphasis in other Islamic intellectual traditions.

Another example of the debate over the meaning of this word is in the work of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the influential Egyptian ideologue often credited with 'formulating the theoretical bases of Islamism in the post-colonial Sunni Muslim World' (Calvert 2014: 1). He asserts in his exegesis of the Qur'ān that *fitnah* is the rule of non-Muslims that must be actively fought by Muslims, which means the justification for proactive jihad is clearly present in contemporary times (Quṭb 1979: 176–177). On the other hand, Ziauddin Sardar, a Progressive Muslim scholar in the UK, argues that, in these verses, *fitnah* implies persecution and oppression of Muslims. Therefore, Muslims must live in peace with other communities, by accepting unbelief as a feature of human diversity, and accepting non-Muslim rule as long as their basic rights and safety are not under attack (Sardar 2015: 138). Therefore, the interpretation of this word can have a large impact on the justifications Muslim states and political groups, as well as individual believers, need for political action, including the use of force, against non-Muslim individuals, communities, and states.

Related to the hermeneutical tool of semantics, Progressive Muslims also highlight the concept of 'semiotic polyvalence' in their interpretive methods (Duderija 2011: 144). Semiotic polyvalence requires the acceptance that the text does not have one fixed meaning that can be *discovered*, instead it is a field upon which human interpretation and agency is exercised to *derive* meaning. This assumption opens the inevitability of multiple meanings and different valid approaches to derive them. However, Progressive Muslims do not claim that all meanings are equally valid but that there can potentially be multiple valid meanings depending on the context and tools used to interpret the Qur'ān.

Asbāb ul-nuzūl is a classical hermeneutical technique that sought to fully grasp the meaning and purpose of a verse by analysing the context around its revelation, usually in

light of *ḥadīth* related to the verse (Rippin 1988b). One of the ways this hermeneutical technique is developed within Progressive Muslim hermeneutics is through the technique known as 'specification' (*takhsīs al zamān wal-makān*), i.e., specifying the time and place where the literal meaning or command of a verse served its original purpose. Using this technique, Fazlur Rahman (1982), a liberal modernist Muslim scholar whose ideas are often referred to by contemporary Progressive Muslims, argued that it is not the literal meaning of a verse which should be the key to its interpretation but the principle upon which it is based. He called this act of interpretation a 'double movement', which involves, in the first phase, determining the situation in which the verse was revealed and the principle behind it, and, in the second one, applying the principle rather than the literal meaning of the verse to concrete situations in the present (Rahman 1982: 20). When using this device, the Progressive Muslim interpreters also argue that Muslims should practically seek to uphold the moral principle and purpose rather than the literal rule or meaning in the application of Islamic law and ethics in their states, communities, and daily personal lives (Barlas 2002: 22). Hence, the hermeneutic tool of 'sociohistorical embeddedness' or 'specification' is crucial for deriving values-based and contextually-relevant meanings from the Qur'ān.

Khaled Abou el Fadl, for instance, argued that the *'illa* (operative cause) behind women being told to 'lower over them their garments (*jalābīb*)' in the Qur'ānic verse 33:59 was to protect them from harm, abuse, and harassment in the specific context of seventh century Medina (2016: 9). Therefore, Muslim women in contexts where they are at a higher risk of negative attention, harassment, and abuse due to wearing the hijab are not required to wear it as the practice of Islamic veiling in this context violates its original purpose. Furthermore, el Fadl applied the technique of 'specification' on other Qur'ānic verses like

24:31 and 24:58 to analyse the concept of modesty and how it is related to the terms *zīnah* and *ʻawrah*. He reached the conclusion that the moral principles behind these terms are more general, like avoiding conceit, vanity, arrogance, and 'immodest flouting of physical appearance' rather than about specific items of clothing (el Fadl 2016: 8). As long as Muslims act on these broader moral principles, they can determine the kinds of clothes and behaviours that violate these moral precepts in their ever-changing personal contexts. Therefore, based on the hermeneutical technique of 'specification', el Fadl issued a *fatwá* that concluded that in the context of the USA wearing the hijab or a *jilbāb* is 'not a *farḍ* [mandatory] and no sin is acquired for failing to wear the hijab'. (2016: 18).

Progressive Muslim exegetes also apply and develop the classical doctrine of *naskh wa mansukh*, i.e., that some verses of the Qur'ān were made inapplicable as other verses have abrogated them, which has played an important role in traditional *fiqh* schools (Burton 1990). For instance, Abdullahi An-Na'im, a US-based Islamic scholar focusing on developing a human-rights based Islamic *fiqh*, advocated the use of *naskh* for Qur'ānic interpretation by rethinking and reformulating the rationale and consequences of the *naskh* doctrine as used by 'the vast majority of Sunni jurists and schools of thought' because 'it is imperative to do so if we are to resolve the problems raised by the modern application of the public law of *sharīʻah* (1990: 21). However, Progressive Muslims criticise the classical formulations of this doctrine as lacking sufficient socio-historical contextualisation and a values-based purpose. For example, Louay Fatoohi, a writer on Islamic law, writes about how the doctrine of *naskh wa mansūkh* is used by militant Islamists to claim that the verses ordering war have abrogated all the other verses advocating peaceful coexistence with all nations and communities (2013: 244). Overall, Progressive Muslims claim that the

application of *naskh* has often led to methodological inaccuracies, rigidity in the interpretation of the Qur'ān, contradictory interpretations, and ethical violations and 'should be minimised and confined to only clear cases on which the evidence is conclusive' (Kamali 1996: 14).

Thematic holism (*mawḍūʿi* method) is another commonly used hermeneutical device used in Progressive Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān (Duderija 2011: 148). This interpretation technique differs from the verse-by-verse interpretation strategy employed in traditional Qur'ān exegesis (*tafsīr*). Instead of translating or interpreting each verse as it is written in the Qur'ān, the Progressive Muslim approach involves searching for and collecting all verses that address a certain theme, concept, word, or idea and then trying to understand how the Qur'ān talks about that specific theme overall. It also employs a less literalistic interpretation of the words in a verse and searches for the broader principles and patterns that emerge from the examination of multiple similar verses.

Furthermore, all interpretations, including those of Progressive Muslims, are subject to the interpreter's subjective belief system. Exegetes always have their own 'ideological imperatives' defined as 'the lenses through which the interpreter sees reality' (Rahman 2018: 60). These imperatives, also called *a priori* ideological assumptions, influence the kind of emphasis, selection, and rejection, as well as glossing over, practised by interpreters of texts, especially religious ones because of their vital significance for the interpreter. The Progressive Muslim approach is also based on the assumption that God declares anything good because of its positive ramifications for human flourishing. It differs from the understanding of ethics as something good *because* God has declared it so. Progressive Muslims also believe that ethical principles are accessible and understandable through

reason, individual conscience, and lived experience rather than based only on faith (el Fadl 2002: 15).

Therefore, Progressive Muslims advocate being transparent and clear about their 'hermeneutical assumption that the actual nature and character of the Qur'ānic discourse seeks to realize and reach an underlying objective (*qaṣd*) in the form of certain ethicoreligious values considered fundamental principles of the Qur'ānic worldview' (Duderija 2011: 151). This approach develops on the *maqāṣid* (aims/purpose of *sharī'ah*)-*maṣlaḥah* (human welfare) framework within the *ʾUṣūl al-Fiqh* literature that plays a role in pre-modern *fiqh* traditions. For instance, the Ḥanafīh school allows the use of *istiḥsan*, or juristic preference, to choose among different legal options the one that is considered best for *maṣlaḥah* (Auda 2008). However, unlike the traditional *fiqh* schools, the Progressive Muslim hermeneutics places *maqāṣid-maṣlaḥah* as 'the highest governing hermeneutical principle' (Duderija 2011: 151). Hence, a verse related to gender roles may begin with the value and aim that all humans should be treated with an equal respect with no difference based on the gender of the person. Given that any verse can have multiple plausible interpretations, only those interpretations that align with the *a priori* value and aim are selected while equally plausible interpretations that contradict this value are rejected.

Finally, another hermeneutic approach employed within Progressive Muslim discourse is to prioritise the use of reason-based opinion (*ra'y*), critical thinking, empirical evidence/knowledge (*'ilm*) and independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) for interpreting the meaning of any verse (Duderija 2011: 156). This requires subjecting interpretations to various empirical and logical tests and comparing it with the body of knowledge and understanding that we possess as a species. Any interpretation that seems to contradict logic and evidence is

dubious and requires further investigation or replacement. These hermeneutical techniques lead to a particularly stark difference in the extent to which the *ḥadīth* literature is utilised and privileged in interpretations of the Qur'ān. Progressive Muslims often relegate it in their analyses, and many interpreters reject its validity altogether. Whereas the traditional *'ulamā'*, both Sunni and Shī'i, used the knowledge of the reliability of the narrators in the chains of transmission (*'ilm asma' al-rijāl* – biographies of *ḥadīth* narrators) to establish the authenticity of a *ḥadīth*, Progressive Muslims accept or reject a given *ḥadīth* based on analysing its subject content (*matn*) in light of reason- and knowledge-based criteria (*'ilm ul dirāyā* -knowledge of what is seen and knowable).

Although this scepticism of the authenticity and validity of the *ḥadīth* has a long intellectual history in Islam, it was revived in early twentieth-century colonial India as a full-blown movement of the 'deniers of hadīth' (known as Qur'ānists or Ahl al-Qur'ān) (Brown 1996; Qasmi 2011). The legacy of these modernist movements carries on in how Progressive Muslims use the *ḥadīth* in their interpretations of Islamic Revelation. The liberal reformist British-Pakistani Islamic scholar, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, for instance, lays down seven rules for using the *ḥadīth*. His main point is that a *ḥadīth* should not contradict the Qur'ān or the example of the Prophet (*sunnah*), and human reason and conscience (Ghamidi 2010: 62). Leaving aside the *ḥadīth* literature, or using it very selectively, is a fundamental departure from the traditional *'Uṣūl al-Fiqh* practise of using *ḥadīth* as one of the primary sources for *tafsīr* and *fiqh* utilised by *'ulamā'* within the orthodox schools of *fiqh*.

2.8. CONCLUSION

This chapter began with an introduction of some of the contestations of the meaning of Islamic texts that Progressive Muslims engage in with other Muslims in the British context

through the heterodox positions and practices of two Progressive Muslim organisations, the IMI and Quilliam. This led into an exploration of the historical, theological, and methodological features that define the category of 'Progressive Islam' and how Progressive Muslim scholars and activists construct Islam as a religion of gender equity, peace, liberation, and respect for diversity. I also describe the spiritual and the intellectual approaches of Progressive Muslims towards meaning-making. Among the latter the hermeneutic resources by Muslim theoreticians are discussed. In later chapters (5 and 6) we will see how variants of these approaches are used to give women and LGBTQIA+ people the opportunity to practise Islam and feel included and empowered in the Muslim community. While chapters 7 and 8 explore how the same features are employed to launch divergent politics regarding political violence and the state. In these chapters we will see how 'Islamic liberation' can be located either in the secular state, as is the case for for Quilliam, or in an egalitarian religious community, as demonstrated for the IMI.

3. The Inclusive Mosque Initiative

The Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI) was founded in London in 2012. It was established by Muslim feminists and people with an ethical and political focus on Islamic inclusivity. As the term implies, their ideology is to include all sects, sub-sects, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and (dis)abilities in the Muslim community. It is a grassroots voluntary organisation which runs mostly on individual donations from participants and volunteers, as well as grants from philanthropic organisations that align with their values. It has a board of trustees consisting of a diverse mix of Muslim women from different ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, and class backgrounds although they did not have a trans woman on their board at the time of my fieldwork. There was a recognition from the board that trans women, intersex and gender non-binary individuals were still not as represented in the power structure of the organisation as would be ideal.

This chapter aims to give a thick description of the IMI through its main ritual practise: the Friday congregational prayers. My overall objective is to describe and understand the core features of the discourses and practices that are central to the people involved in this community and in the process highlight the ways they overlap with, and diverge from, mainstream Muslim communities.

3.1. *WHERE* IS THE INCLUSIVE MOSQUE?

Jesper Petersen uses the analytical term 'pop-up mosques' to describe 'mosques without bricks' that 'pop-up' in spaces that usually serve other purposes but are converted into temporary mosques shortly before a ritual, such as a Friday prayer or Eid prayer, and in between rituals they exist not as physical spaces but as 'networks of Muslims' that consider themselves members of, or associated with, a pop-up mosque and as 'physical objects stored in congregants' homes or…on the site where the mosque regularly pops up'(2019: 178–179). The congregants or organisers of these mosques must assemble and disassemble the mosque each time a ritual is held. Due to this 'pop-up' feature these mosques are distinctive in their conceptualisation of what 'mosques' are, how they function, and what they look like. They promote the idea that congregants can actively construct 'a mosque' in various kinds of spaces—ranging from religious venues, like churches, to secular ones, like classrooms, to other unconventional spaces, like public parks and online zoom rooms—to fulfil the ritual needs of a congregation flexibly and with more mobility.[40] This is like the ritual space known as a *muṣallá* which is usually a temporary space, usually outside the mosque, used for prayer, but can also be a room or an indoor space where prayers occur but these spaces are not considered a mosque by the congregants as opposed to a pop-up mosque. A 'pop-up' mosque is an emic term within mostly a Western context and how congregants view their religious organisation.

As of 2022 the IMI operates as a pop-up mosque with various physical and online locations, but they aspire to build a purpose-built mosque in Central London that would be

[40] Irrespective of its historical authenticity, such an account evokes Prophetic statements reported in several *aḥadīth* that 'the entire earth has been made a place of prayer, except for graveyards and washrooms.' *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* 317.

fully accessible for people with disabilities and would operate according to their inclusive ethos. During the time I was conducting most of my fieldwork with them (2017-2019) they were hosting their fortnightly Friday prayers primarily in a room in a Central London 'Non-religious' Church, called 'New Unity'. The spatial features of the venues that the IMI chooses to host its events and rituals in provide clues to its goals and values. They choose spaces that imbue a sense of relaxed and open conversations in an intimate setting through its size and set-up, as well as a sense of an equality among all congregants by ensuring that people are organised in a way where they are not spatially differentiated from each other. The venue of the Friday prayers was deliberately chosen based on the values that the IMI espouses and aspires towards, i.e., inclusivity, accessibility, and diversity.

New Unity itself is a congregation with a very interesting history, rituals, and belief systems and matches some of the core values and goals of the IMI. It emerged from the broader Unitarian and Universalist Christian traditions and traces its history back to 1667 when a group of religious dissenters gathered in Islington for regular prayers. They raised a cathedral-like 'Dissenting Gothic palace' in the current site of the church in Islington in 1862 but this original building was destroyed in the Blitz (1940-41) and reconstructed with a more practical design (History: Upper Street n.d.: 3). New Unity calls itself a 'radically inclusive community' that is at the 'far fringe of the unitarian spectrum' as they are 'larger, younger, and more social justice-oriented than most others.' The congregation does not espouse any specific creed or dogma other than 'a faith in human ability, dignity, and goodness' (New Unity 2021). On its website the congregation contrasts itself with 'religion' by stating that for 'most people in the UK' religion evokes judgment and hierarchy while their approach is to promote equality and encourage people to 'think for themselves' (2021).

One of the organisers of IMI *Jum'ah* once commented on this statement from the New Unity church as 'stigmatising and simplistic' in its view of 'traditional' religion, but added that the IMI shared New Unity's larger ethos of promoting a sense of safety and acceptance for all human beings in all parts of social life, not just in religious spaces. This opinion is representative of how the IMI, at an official level, also approaches mainstream and traditional Muslim practices and beliefs, i.e., they often state that they are an 'alternative' space of Islamic practise that adds to the existing diversity of Muslim spaces and voices, which they also consider legitimate. Therefore, the official stance of the IMI explicitly positions their own activities and beliefs in a non-confrontational manner with other Muslim traditions and communities. In fact, the positioning of the IMI's activism and critique is often directed towards Islamophobia and how the British state and society perpetuates harmful discourses and practices against religious Muslims. Hence, they align themselves with the concerns and positions of other Muslim communities, including conservative and traditional Muslims, when it comes to conflicts and controversies regarding Islam and Muslims in Britain.

The entrance of the New Unity Church building conveyed its ethos and message clearly as it had a large arched sign at its entrance gate with the word 'Unity' on it and a large bulletin board with information and schedules for their services and events. Crucially, the bulletin board would display attention-grabbing quotes that highlighted its dissenting, inclusive and humanist ethos, for example, 'Heathens and heretics welcome'; 'We Become What We Do'; 'Believe in Good'; 'From Atheists to Zoroastrians, all are Welcome'; and 'A rabbi, a nun, and an atheist walk into a building…'.

The Church is conveniently located and accessible for people with disabilities. The entrance of the building opens on a major throughfare of Central London with broad pavements. The church building also has gender neutral, disability, wheel-chair accessible bathrooms in addition to single-sex bathrooms. The board of the IMI views the types of bathrooms available in a venue as crucial for deciding its suitability for their events. This is done to make sure the prayer space is accessible to people with disabilities, suitable for caregivers of babies and young children, and inclusive to all gender identities and none (those who identify as Agender). Additionally, the type of bathroom facilities in a venue are important for attendees at IMI events because prayers are usually a part of all types of events organised by IMI and attendees often need to perform their ritual ablutions (*wuḍūʾ*) before offering their prayers or handling the Qur'ān.

Although this was the primary site for most *Jum'ah* prayers during the time I was conducting my fieldwork, there were a few other spaces that were also occasionally used for the Friday prayers, which also showcase the ethos and culture of the IMI. Before the New Unity space became the main site for *Jum'ah* prayers there used to be other spaces for the Friday prayers, like Oxford House, a community arts centre in East London, and the Wesley Euston Hotel in Central London. This hotel describes itself as 'the first ethical hotel in the UK' due to their commitment to sustainable operations and social responsibility (How is The Wesley hotel London ethical and sustainable? n.d.). The IMI used one of the hotel's medium-sized rooms for Friday, and the hotel would also often provide catered *ḥalāl* and/or vegan snacks for the event. Furthermore, a larger event hall in this hotel was often used for other events like talks, the IMI's birthday celebrations, or Eid prayers, because these events often had more participants and guests than the *halaqah* and *Jum'ah* prayers.

The Inclusive *halaqah* sessions were usually held in a beautiful Bedouin-tent space located in Central London at St. Ethelburga's Church. St. Ethelburga's Church is an 800-year-old church in the City of London that re-invented itself as a 'Centre for Reconciliation and Peace' after it was almost destroyed by an Irish Republican Army bomb in 1993. This Bedouin tent was built by St. Ethelburga's Church as a space that is designed to encourage non-hierarchical community engagements in response to the tensions that emerged due to the events of 9/11, by seating everyone in an intimate space and at the same level. In addition, the IMI also offered *iftār* (sunset opening of the fast) events during Ramadan and they were usually held in the main nave space of St. Ethelburga's Church. In addition to these events, the IMI also offered a programme of conferences and talks spaced throughout the year in addition to observing other important religious events, like *Āshūrā'* and *Arba'īn*.[41] These events usually occurred in spaces suited for conferences or talks in Central London to ensure accessibility and convenience. The events team at the IMI would tap into their networks to choose venues that not only offered the best rates but were also embedded within social and activist networks that focus on similar work related to environmental sustainability, disability access, and social justice.

3.2. EGALITARIAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYMBOLISM

The IMI's lack of an elevated platform or pulpit (*minbar*), lectern, or even differentiating chairs for the ritual leader (*khaṭīb* or *imām*) symbolised the spiritual and temporal parity of

[41] *Āshūrā'* is the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. It is a major religious commemoration for Shī'i Muslims as well as an important date for other branches of the Muslim community. For Shī'i Muslims it is a day of solemn mourning of the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in 680 C.E at Karbala. This was a major historical trauma that played, and continues to play, a central role in the formation of the Shī'i identity and community. For Sunnis too the day holds religious and historical significance for the same reason. Additionally, it is believed to be the day that Moses fasted in gratitude to Allah for the liberation of the Israelites. While *Arba'īn* is a religious observance that occurs forty days after the Day of the *Āshūrā' and is* primarily marked by the Shī'i community. It is observed by making a pilgrimage to Karbala as well as holding local religious gatherings to mark the event.

the *imām* to the congregation. Although religious knowledge, formal training, level of personal religiosity, and moral character were all qualities that were greatly valued and appreciated, they did not function as the primary source of ritual authority and legitimacy. Instead, ritual authority and legitimacy was based on a mutually bestowed recognition that all congregants who participate in the community are genuinely seeking spiritual enlightenment and self-actualisation and, hence, are capable of facilitating mutual learning and growth through the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Whether this communal model changes to one that follows more closely the traditional model of having certain individuals specialise in specific ritual roles, once the IMI community develops further or when they have their own dedicated mosque building, remains to be seen, but at the time of writing the volunteer-led, collective, rotating approach to ritual leadership and roles remains a conscious choice at the IMI, which is meant to reflect a collaborative and egalitarian pedagogical approach.

Since the IMI aims to create spaces and events that are inclusive and safe for a diversity of Muslims and people from Muslim backgrounds, they make sure that they include information, not only in all social media and newsletter announcements but also at each event, that briefly spells out their basic values and the ground rules for their events. These announcements include statements highlighting that their events and spaces are inclusive safe spaces for women, people with disabilities, people from minority and/or marginalised ethnic and religious communities, working class people, and LGBTQIA+ Muslims. People are encouraged to share their views in a respectful manner, give more space for those who are marginalised in mainstream British society and/or in other Muslim spaces to express themselves, and respect other people's differences in ritual practices and religious beliefs.

Furthermore, due to the sensitive nature of topics related to religion, politics, gender, and sexual orientation, the IMI aims to be proactive in ensuring that volunteers, venue staff, and attendees at their events and spaces are mindful of other congregants' privacy and confidentiality preferences. Therefore, even though the Friday prayers and other IMI events are open to the public there are safeguards placed to ensure that attendees at these events feel safe and comfortable. For instance, the IMI takes pictures and videos for their social media accounts, organisational reports, and their archives but they make sure they announce clearly at the start of each event how people can make their preferences related to pictures/videos known to the photographer and/or videographer. Similarly, access to journalists is only approved after careful consideration of the safety, confidentiality, and needs of their attendees and congregants. They also have an approval process in place before researchers are allowed to engage with the congregants and participate in events. This approval process highlights the need for careful attention to the confidentiality and informed consent of the congregants.

3.3. THE IMI ṢALĀH AL-JUM'AH

John Bowen described three broad ways of teaching about Islam adopted by Muslims in France: a rule-book approach observed in Salafi circles, a *madhhab* based approach, and a third approach based on seeking 'new principles in scriptures, and that these principles ought to be related to one another in a systematic way' (Bowen 2010: 65). Correspondingly, the way Islamic rituals, like *ṣalāh*, are taught and performed reflect these different approaches to Islam in the French context. The Progressive Muslim approach can be classified within the third approach to learning how to be a Muslim as it is a new approach based on ethical postulates and general objectives found in the Qur'ān and supplemented by other sources of

religious knowledge, like the *ḥadīth*, as elaborated in the last chapter. Bowen writes how the third approach provides 'the groundwork for offering Islamic justifications for social projects and for adapting to European social conditions' (ibid: 65). Similarly, the IMI bases its own social project and politics on principles and ethical postulates that they locate in Islamic scriptures and put in practice through their Friday congregational prayers. First, therefore, I will reflect on the significance of the Friday midday prayers among Muslims.

3.3.1. Friday Prayers: A Central Muslim Ritual

Fridays are considered the holiest day of the week and a day of celebration and prayers by most Muslims around the world. Muslims usually take care to bathe and wear clean clothes on the day. According to the majority Sunni and contemporary Shī'i schools, congregational prayers are considered to have more social and spiritual benefits than praying alone but it is not considered obligatory by all legal schools to pray in congregation—although preferred—for the daily five obligatory prayers. On the other hand, the Friday communal prayers (*Jum'ah*) are considered a mandatory (*farḍ*) religious obligation for eligible adult Muslim men, when possible for them, by the majority of the Sunni jurists. Although all adult Muslims are considered fully responsible religious actors in classical Sunni legal doctrine, the congregational Friday prayer was not considered obligatory for women, slaves, villagers, or nomads by at least one of the main legal schools (Katz 2013: 131).

For the Shī'i the Friday prayer is directly linked with the institution of the *Imām*, the legitimate religious leader, and there have been debates and ambivalence about the validity and permissibility of the congregational Friday prayers without the explicit authorisation of the *imām*. This became more complex after the disappearance of the Twelfth *Imām* (believed to be in occultation waiting to return at the end of history), with Shī'i scholarly authorities either considering Friday congregational prayers not permissible or permissible but not

obligatory. With the development of the doctrine of 'general deputyship' (*niyāba 'āmma),* which claimed that in the absence of the Twelfth *imām* it is the Shī'i legal scholars who serve as his representatives on earth, and the establishment of Shī'i states, like the Safavid dynasty, the Friday prayers were gradually promoted as long as they were authorised or led by either a qualified legal scholar (*mujtahid*) or the legitimate Shī'i political ruler (Stewart 2009).

The congregational Friday prayers still remained limited in Shī'i communities and scholars remained divided on whether they were obligatory until the twentieth century, when they started to gain broader appeal and support from the legal scholars and the public (Momen 1985: 298). Finally, the institution of the congregational Friday prayer was actively promoted by Khomeini to demonstrate the political and social power of the Shī'i clergy, and after the Islamic revolution it was massively revived institutionally in Iran (Katz 2013: 138). It is debatable if this state-driven public religious revival has also led to an internalisation of the public religious norms and narrative. For instance, the anthropologist Roxanne Varzi writes about secular urban youth in Tehran and the stark differences between their public and private moralities (Varzi 2006). Many contemporary Iranian youth form religious subjectivities opposed to the public religious identity promoted by the state, and resist participating in public religious rituals. Therefore, despite the active promotion of the Friday communal prayers by the religious and political elite as a central religious activity and obligation for Iranians, the weekly attendance rates remains low (Tezcur et al. 2006). Similarly, public religious symbolism and practice is also less prevalent among the British Iranian diaspora (Gholami 2015). This is interesting when compared to the IMI community which is often composed of young British Muslims, including from the Iranian diaspora, for whom religious practice and symbolism is central to their identities, politics, and sociality.

Thus, for them the *Jum'ah* is the most spiritually, socially, and politically significant of the Islamic prayers. [42]

3.3.2. Setting up the IMI Jum'ah

In this section I will give an overview of a typical Friday congregational event during my fieldwork period, as well as describe the venue in more detail. The way the congregation is organised—from the way men and women arrange themselves during and between *ṣalāh* to the way the space of the venue is arranged—diagrams and signifies specific claims about social organisation and performatively produces individual and communal norms. Therefore, elaborating on the process and spatiality of this ritual is essential for understanding its significance and how it is similar to, or distinct from, the way the ritual is practised in other mosques. Following the central importance of these prayers in the Islamic tradition, the IMI considers offering inclusive and gender-equal Friday communal prayers its *raison d'être* and its key organising ritual. All other IMI activities, work, and rituals include the core activity of prayers because its primary goal is to provide an alternative mosque space.

One of the volunteers, referred to as the *Jum'ah* coordinator, was responsible for recruiting volunteers who would set up the prayer space as well as for the three ritual roles of the *mu'adhin*, *khaṭīb*, and imām. The *Jum'ah* coordinator was also responsible for making the rotation schedules, documenting the attendance numbers at the Friday prayers, recording and saving the sermons, and managing the communal prayers overall. The solicitation for signing up for these roles occurred both informally during the various events and meetings

[42] Based on *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* literature, the congregational Friday prayer is believed to carry more divine rewards (*thawāb*) than the other obligatory prayers (al-Munajjid 2010). For a short overview of differing legal schools' positions about the value of congregational prayers see Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*, 128–30.

organised by the IMI, as well as more formally on the official social media platforms of the organisation. Everyone who signed up to be a volunteer for the IMI was added to dedicated social media channels where the volunteers could communicate, plan, and coordinate with each other. Furthermore, the IMI also invited guest *khaṭīb*/*imāms* who were usually religious leaders, activists, academics, and/or religious experts (*'ulamā'*) active in Progressive Muslim social and religious networks.

The IMI volunteers would typically arrive at the New Unity Church around 20 minutes before the start time for the prayers and set up the prayer space. One of the most important material possessions that the IMI had was a large black bag with wheels that was informally referred to as 'The IMI Bag'. The volunteers either brought the bag with them or would access it from the storeroom in the church. When I was volunteering at the IMI, I was frequently given the responsibility of accessing the IMI bag from the New Unity Church and bringing it to other venues where they planned to construct a 'pop-up mosque' space since congregational prayers were a feature of almost all IMI events. This was often St. Ethelburga's Church where prayers were held after the Inclusive *halaqahs* and during the big Ramadan *iftar* events. This was the bag that had all the basic materials needed to set up a prayer space anywhere, allowing the IMI to remain relatively mobile. One of the founders of the mosque remarked that the bag holds an important symbolic importance for the organisation as it represents the current spirit of the IMI as a 'travelling,' 'pop-up,' or 'mobile' mosque that is flexible, open, and acts in the local contexts of the congregants to meet their spiritual and communal needs.

The IMI bag had yoga mats; green sheets; a couple of prayer rugs (*sajjāda* or *jānamāz*); *ḥalāl*, gluten-free, and vegan snacks (reflecting the preferences of the

congregation); coffee and tea bags; printed signage and posters; a donation box; crucial documents and information sheets; prayer beads (*misbaḥah* or *tasbīḥ*); clay tablets (*turbah*) made of soil from Karbala that are used by Shī'i Muslims to prostrate upon during prayers; head scarves and prayer caps; and a few copies of the Qur'ān from various translators and commentators.

The entrance door of the church was usually locked, password-protected, and would shut automatically. One of the roles of the IMI volunteers was to make sure to place a wedge under the main entrance door to keep it open for the duration of the *Ṣalāh al-Jum'ah*. There was a recurrent joke among regulars about the fear of being locked out if the wedge was displaced and having to miss the Friday prayer ritual that they cherish tremendously. A short corridor led to the door for the room that served as the IMI's prayer space. This door was usually kept open before the beginning of the prayers and closed, but not locked, when the *mu'adhin* performed the *adhān* before the *khutbāh*.

The prayer room was moderately sized and could accommodate up to twenty people comfortably. There was an attached fully equipped kitchen space on the opposite side of the entrance door. The kitchen was separated from the prayer room by a large green wooden panel with a door and windows. The flooring was made of panels that looked like hardwood and the walls were painted in an off-white colour. The ceiling had a large skylight window that gave the room a bright, expansive, and airy look. There were bookshelves next to a part of the front and side walls. Sometimes there were other tables or furniture in the room which the volunteers would push to the front and side of the room to clear the space. The walls were usually empty but sometimes there would be some artwork pasted on them, like drawings of nature, made by children who attended the Church events and classes. I am

unaware of any objections to the drawings in the room, but they were never on the wall that faced the congregants during prayer.

The IMI volunteers would lay out blue yoga mats and then green sheets on top of the yoga mats to mark the area for people to offer their prayers. This area was a few steps from the entrance door, giving enough space for people to gather and chat behind the prayer space before and after the prayers. Since this was not a dedicated and custom-built prayer space, there was no *miḥrāb*, but the volunteers always made sure to check the *Qiblah* using smartphone apps when arranging the orientation of the communal prayer area and the placement of the prayer mat and/or chair for the *khaṭīb* and *imām*. There were chairs lining one of the side walls of the room for attendees to use if they preferred to sit and observe, meditate, or socialise. Some people also used the chairs to be seated as they offered their prayers due to disabilities or personal preferences, and these worshippers were seated facing the *Qiblah* right behind the standing communal praying space marked by the green sheets. In front of the communal prayer space, there was the space for the *khaṭīb*/*imām* with its own yoga mat and prayer sheet and/or a prayer rug (*sajjāda*).

The roles of *imām*, *khaṭīb*, and *mu'adhin* would sometimes be performed by separate people, but usually the *khuṭbāh* was given by the *imām* leading the prayers while the *mu'adhin* was often someone separate from the *khaṭīb*/*imām*. The *khaṭīb*/*imām* would either sit on the floor on the prayer rug in front of the communal praying space or be seated on a chair facing the congregants. The IMI also did not have a raised platform or pulpit (*minbar*) where, according to traditional Islamic practice, the *khaṭībs* stand to deliver their sermons. There was no symbolically marked *minbar* partly because of the nature of the non-dedicated space they occupied, and partly as a deliberate choice made to create an egalitarian prayer

context that reflected the theological, social, and political values of the Inclusive Mosque. Nor, indeed, was any role-- imām/*khaṭīb* or *Mu'adhin*-- fixed. These aspects of the IMI are among its most distinct features compared to the practice in other mosques and facilitates an egalitarian, participatory, and communal culture. Thus, the congregation itself collaborates and co-creates the prayer space by both volunteering to set up the prayer space from scratch each time using the mobile 'IMI Bag' and by rotating the different ritual roles among themselves. The *imām*, therefore, may not be specialised or theologically qualified by an official certificate, nor, indeed, is the position a long-term one.

On the other side wall, a table would be laid out with a few snacks, coffee, and various types of tea bags for the participants as well as a donation box for the IMI. The volunteers not only made sure that the snacks were always *ḥalāl*, but also prioritised other dietary needs and values, like providing gluten-free, locally sourced, organic, and vegan options. The snacks were usually consumed after the prayers as this encouraged the attendees to stay and socialise with each other after the prayer ritual concluded. This was usually the most casual part of the Friday prayer ritual when the congregants not only discussed the *khuṭbah* amongst each other and with the *khaṭīb*/*imām*, but also cultivated community bonds and a shared identity by sharing their personal lives, exchanging jokes, engaging in heated political debates, and working out shared values and group boundaries.

3.3.3. The IMI Jum'ah Ritual

Once people walked in from the main gate, they might notice the signage with the IMI's logo and arrows guiding them towards the prayer room inside the church. The bathroom facilities were important at this time as many people would perform the ritual ablution (*wuḍū'*) before they entered the prayer space. There was no dress code requirement for either the ritual

leaders or the congregants, and women were not required to cover their hair at any point although many chose to do so themselves. At the start of any IMI Friday congregation, a volunteer would always announce that the space is a 'safe space' for Muslims who experience marginality or rejection in other Muslim spaces, hence, everyone was encouraged to 'allow space' for diverse identities, beliefs, and practices. This meant that at any given Friday congregation there was diversity in the way people would offer their prayers. Hence, there was an attempt at creating a norm for diversity in ritual performance and religious beliefs in this space, and congregants were encouraged to be respectful towards other people even if their beliefs were not compatible. Furthermore, in its inclusive role the IMI provides space to non-practising Muslims also. However, IMI spaces are far from 'anything goes' as it sets out a relatively broad range of permissible religious ritual and belief expressions in their spaces but with clear boundaries expressed through the frequent discussion on IMI values.

The *mu'adhin* would open the prayer space with an *adhān* while facing the *Qiblah* and standing on the right side of where the *khaṭīb*/*imām* would be sitting. The *adhān* was simultaneously translated in the British Sign Language (BSL) either by the *mu'adhin* or, more frequently, by someone else in the congregation. There are minor differences in the call to prayers between the Sunni and Shī'i traditions and the IMI encouraged *mu'adhins* from different traditions, or those willing to perform according to different traditions for a representation of different traditions. This call to prayers would usually take place around 15-20 minutes before the *khuṭbah* was due to begin, and it marked the time when congregants could choose to offer their voluntary (*nafl*) prayers individually or behind the *imām*—if the *imām* was offering them.

The prayers at this time were not offered in unison as individuals would start their prayers whenever they entered the prayer room or according to their preferences. While most congregants would offer the four full iterations of the prescribed movements that form one unit of *ṣalāh* (*rakaʻah*) at this time, based on the standard practices of Shīʻi and Sunni traditions, others followed different Muslim traditions or had their own personal preferences in terms of how many *rakaʻah* they chose to pray, how they chose to do so, and whether they chose to offer these supererogatory prayers at all. Thereafter, there was usually another *adhān* right before the *khaṭīb* began delivering their sermon. Right after the *khuṭbah* concluded, a member of the congregation, usually the same person who served as the *mu'adhin*, would offer the *iqāmah* which is a modified *adhān* given immediately before the congregational prayers in a more quick and less melodic manner. The exact format of the *iqāmah* would deliberately vary over the weeks to represent the practices of the different schools and sects of Islam. Attendees who wished to participate in the two full congregational cycles of prayer movements (*rakaʻah*), which are considered obligatory (*farḍ*) by Sunni and most Shīʻi Muslims, lined up in straight parallel rows (*saf*)—which meant that they stood shoulder-to-shoulder with each other without any gender segregation—or they sat in the chairs behind the standing worshippers while the *imām* would lead them from the front.

These *farḍ* prayers would begin with an individual declaration of the intention (*niyyah*) to offer the prayers to Allah. This is traditionally considered a necessary element for the validity of a *ṣalāh* and requires a conscious and explicit internal non-verbal or a verbalised declaration to perform the ritual for the sake of Allah. Some congregants spoke specific sequence of sentences under their breath, while a few did not feel this was a required

step for them as they held that intention was already present in the decision to perform and carry out this ritual.

Thereafter, the *imām* and the worshippers (*muṣalli*) would all face the direction of the *Qiblah* and offer the prayers in unison but, importantly, not always in the same way. The *imām* would open the prayers with a *takbīr* (*Allāhu Akbar*) and then loudly and melodically recite *Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah*, the first chapter of the Qur'ān, followed by another portion of the Qur'ān, according to their preference. Thereafter, in keeping with the ethos of diversity and inclusivity of the IMI, different *imāms* would follow the different practices observed by the various Islamic schools, traditions, and sects. Another important difference from the traditional ritual is that the congregants themselves were also free to follow their own preferred prayer practices *during* the congregational prayer, even if these diverged from the *imām*. Overall, there is a broad consensus on the major movements and the sequences between most Muslim schools, traditions, and sects for performing the Friday *ṣalāh*, but there are a few key differences in details, e.g., where, or if, to fold arms, the position of the feet and legs, the focus of the eyes, the loudness of recitation, the use of *turbah*, the recitation of *du'ā' Qunūt*, and how the end of the prayer is marked.

The congregants were encouraged to pray in the way that they 'feel comfortable with' and informed emphatically that the IMI endorses diversity in how Islamic rituals are performed by believers. Hence, some congregants might hold their hands to their sides, performatively symbolising their affiliation with the Shī'i tradition, while others may fold their hands on their abdomen, representing the practice of the *Ḥanafīh* Sunni tradition. Hence, individual congregants performatively symbolised specific Islamic traditions, resulting in the congregational prayers symbolising and constructing an Islamic community

and tradition different from the sum of its parts, i.e., the tradition of progressive or inclusive Islam. Therefore, the diversity in prayer practices during the congregational prayer not only affirmed the religious affiliations and beliefs of the diverse congregants, but crucially served to enact and affirm the IMI's values of diversity and unity—hence of progressive Islam—during the performance of its most important religious ritual.

Significantly, public congregational prayers are central rituals for Muslims—including Progressive Muslims—not only because they serve spiritual purposes for individuals and the community but also do important political work by performatively symbolising and constructing social identities, belongingness, and boundaries. For instance, John Bowen elaborates on the social performativity of prayer rituals as accomplishing specific goals; diagramming through spatial arrangements various values like egalitarian universalism; indexing particular socio-religious statuses; and legitimising social, political, and cultural authority (Bowen 2012: 50–58).

He gives an example of the way prayers serve social indexing roles by describing the way an Islamic Educational Institute in Paris taught its students in minute details how to perform valid *ṣalāh* according to the rules set by the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (2010: 101). Although the teachers in this Institute acknowledged that there are multiple legitimate ways to offer *ṣalāh* based on the four Sunni legal schools (*madhhab*), they stressed the importance of choosing one *fiqh* tradition, correctly following it, and not to 'mix and match' between the different traditions. This was both a matter of correct ritual performance, due to the internal coherence of the traditions, as well as an example of one 'effort to claim distinction (and a market niche) by way of a particular understanding of Islamic knowledge' (Bowen 2010: 85).

Specifically, the Director of this Institute tried to employ teachers who could consistently follow the Mālikī line because he saw 'staying in a single legal tradition as a bulwark against extremism' (Bowen 2010: 100). Hence, the way the prayers were taught and performed was meant to construct a publicly enacted and visible distinction between their practise of Islam and that of Salafism, which disregards the importance of following one of the traditional schools of *fiqh* (*taqlīd*). The performance of the public congregational prayers aimed to counter the rising influence and power of Salafi teachings amongst young French Muslims. Similarly, in Progressive Muslim spaces the congregational prayers also serve to enact a visible distinction from those practised in other Muslim spaces and make political statements about gender (power relations, roles, and identities), social arrangements (non-hierarchical), and diversity (Thompson 2020a: 848).

Finally, the IMI congregational prayers would conclude with the *imām* offering traditional blessings to Allah and the Prophet, reciting a few prayers, and then inviting everyone to offer a collective *du'ā'* (supplicatory prayer). Thereafter, some congregants chose to continue offering other supererogatory prayers, while others would use this part of the Friday gathering to socialise with each other over the snacks and beverages laid out on the table. Meanwhile, the volunteers would gradually gather the different things that the IMI owns for creating the prayer space and place them all back in the 'IMI Bag'.

3.4. IMI *JUM'AH*: DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES

The aim of this section is to expand on some of the distinctive features of the Friday prayers at the IMI with a view to providing deeper understanding of the organisation itself and the issues that are salient for the people who make up its community. These are based on the *Jum'ah* prayers that I have either observed and participated in directly, or those prayer

sessions for which I was given information by at least one attendee or organiser when I could not attend it. To understand how the IMI differs from traditional mosques in terms of the performance of rituals, such as the Friday prayers, I will take up the traditional views about leadership—the role of the *imām* whether in a political, societal or a religious context—first.

3.4.1. Traditional and Historical Practices of Muslim Ritual Leadership

One of the meanings of the term *imām* is 'the one who is in front' (*amāma*). Hence, it refers to the person who leads communal prayers from the front of the congregants. This specific definition of the term does not cover the more expansive and varied meanings and usage of the term '*imām*' in Muslim communities and history. The term *imām* occurs in the Qur'ān a dozen times and has various meanings but none of them refer to prayer leaders (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 49). The most common meaning of *imām* in the Qur'ānic usage is 'leader', or anyone or anything that serves as a 'model or a guide' to people. The verses in which the term is utilised are categorised as Meccan while the communal public Muslim prayer is probably a ritual that developed during the Medinan period of the Prophet and this is when the term is first likely to have been used to refer to the prayer leader.[43]

Additionally, the term is employed to refer to both religious and political authority and leadership. For instance, within Shī'i doctrine the term '*Imām*' refers to the legitimate spiritual and political leader of all Muslims who is a descendant of the Prophet and has been granted Divine knowledge, authority, and moral infallibility ('*iṣmah*). Furthermore, in some

[43] The chronology of the chapters (*sūrahs*) in the Qur'an is a source of extensive academic debate but there is a broad agreement among contemporary Muslims about it. The traditional Medinan-Meccan chronology is usually attributed to a list compiled by Ibn 'Abbas (d. 688) but was only considered authoritative and fixed much later during the 14th century with the development of extensive Qur'anic exegeses and occasions of revelation literature (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). For an early Western academic chronology of the Qur'an, see the translation of Theodor Nöldeke's *The History of the Qur'ān* (2013), while for more recent chronology using stylometric analyses, see Behnam Sadeghi (2011).

Muslim contexts it is also an honorific that can be given to a person who is considered sufficiently knowledgeable or pious. On the other hand, there are women who perform all of the roles traditionally ascribed to an *imām* but do not use the term but instead refer to themselves as, or are referred by others as, 'chaplains, preachers, missionaries, *'alimas* and more' (Calderini 2021: 32).

The questions related to the model of leadership in Islam have been open since the inception of the religion (Mottahedeh 2001). Is leadership only legitimate if it is accompanied by the correct spiritual or genealogical lineage or is it an achieved role related to the personal merit and capabilities of a person? Is leadership a role endowed on an individual by community agreement or is it legitimate only if appointed or approved by an authority figure from above? The approaches of various Muslim legal schools, communities, and scholars to the questions of how to choose or appoint ritual leaders, and what makes prayers behind an *imām* valid are varied and IMI represents the more egalitarian end within this spectrum of opinions.

The Islamic tradition has examples of both a hierarchical model of leadership emergence that views it as only legitimate if the political authority structure, for instance the caliph, appoints or approves the *imām*, as well as a more community-based understanding of leadership where legitimacy is the consequence of community consensus. Similarly, there are textual and historical resources for both achievement-based, egalitarian, and open criteria for appointing and evaluating the effectiveness and legitimacy of *imāms*, like being knowledgeable (*'ilm*), pious (*fadilah*), just (*'adālah*), proficient in Qur'ānic recitation, and dedicated to Islam as well as for more ascribed, exclusive, and traditional (for the Arab tribes during the Prophet Muhammad's time) criteria, like genealogy (*nasab*), gender, age, being

able-bodied, born within a socially legitimised union, legally a free person, and one's social rank or noble descent (*ḥasab*) (Afsaruddin 2002).

The *ḥadīth* corpus facilitates these large differences in conceptions of legitimate authority more than what seems apparent from just the *fiqh* literature. The *ḥadīth* corpus includes examples of a 'variety and flexibility in the choice of leadership criteria, with a recurrent emphasis on religious knowledge and piety', while the 'early legal sources, unsurprisingly, seem to focus on more pragmatic considerations' like community stability and unity (Calderini 2021: 37). For instance, there are *aḥadīth* where Muhammad is attributed to have claimed that the *imām*, particularly for the greater *imāma* (political leadership), should be from the Quraysh, the Arab tribe that he belonged to, and this was widely implemented in the Muslim world up till the end of the Abbasid era. Similarly, for Shī'i Muslims the claim to imāmate is further restricted to specific descendants of Muhammad and his son-in-law, Ali, who have been granted Divine authority due to their spiritual lineage (Momen 1985).

On the other hand, there are also *aḥadīth* that make a case for the egalitarian principle for choosing an *imām*—for both the greater *imāma* (*al-imāma al-kubrá*) of political leadership, like the caliph, and the lesser *imāma* (*al-imāma al-sughrá*) of prayer leadership—based on knowledge of the Qur'ān, moral excellence, and dedication and sacrifice for the Islamic community. These *aḥadīth* also give examples of unconventional *imāms*, like women, a blind man, a slave, an intersex person, or an underage boy as capable of serving as legitimate *imāms* based on their knowledge and moral character (Calderini 2021: 41).

In classical Sunni Islamic law there are other broadly agreed upon prerequisites or restrictions on who can serve as an *imām*. For instance, the *imām* was supposed to be a free

(not enslaved) individual of legitimate birth who is of an age where they are capable of being held morally responsible (*bulūgh*), which was usually interpreted as after hitting puberty. Furthermore, the *imām* had 'to be a Muslim, to be sane, to be just, and to be male' (Calderini 2021: 39). Although, these were the criteria that the theory and law had broad consensus on, this does not suggest that either this was consistently followed in practice or that there wasn't an active debate between Muslims on the definitions and need for these criteria for choosing an *imām*.

Asma Afsaruddin has explored how, when it came to the actual practice of the Muslim community, the leadership model gradually moved away from the more egalitarian notions introduced by the Prophet of knowledge and piety as the factors that make a legitimate leader to the traditional Arab leadership model, based on genealogy and the socio-political power of a tribe and its tribal leader (2002). In the early part of Muslim history, the political leader and the prayer leader were not seen as distinct roles as the Prophet Muhammad was the first prayer leader as well as the head of the first Muslim state. Similarly, the Rashidun caliphs also led the community from the main congregational mosque in Friday prayers and delivered political speeches during the *khuṭbah*.

Furthermore, leading congregational prayers and delivering sermons from the *minbar* of the main congregational mosque was considered a basis for political leadership and vice versa. For instance, according to some Sunni *ḥadīth* traditions, the Prophet during his fatal illness delegated Abu Bakr to lead the people in prayer and this delegation of the prayer leadership role was an important factor that legitimised his political leadership later for his supporters during his time and for Sunnis thereafter. Over time, with the expansion of the Muslim community there was a requirement for more specialisation of ritual roles and

eventually the caliph no longer acted as a prayer leader himself but instead appointed *imāms* for the main congregational mosques under his territories.

The four classical Sunni legal traditions continued to link political and religious leadership by generally agreeing that those who exercise the greater *imāma* have precedence for exercising the lesser *imāma*. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, for Shī'i Friday congregational prayers are only permissible when led by the Divinely appointed Imām or his representatives on earth, the religious legal experts (*mujtahids*), or at the very least be performed with the legitimate religious and political authority's permission. Similarly, when a congregational prayer was to be held in a private household, these legal schools gave precedence to the master of the house for the role of *imām*. Hence, prayer leadership was, and to a large degree still is, directly linked to the institutions of political and social authority in a community. As Marion Katz states, 'it is only in the absence of individuals with such claims to authority that considerations of religious learning or piety (the only factors actually referred in *ḥadīth*) come into play' (Katz 2013: 139).

3.4.2. Ritual Leadership at the IMI

The *imāms* at IMI do not derive their legitimacy from more established Muslim sources of authority, whether it is support from the international centres of Sunni or Shī'i authority and learning, like Al-Azhar or the seminaries (*ḥawzah*) in Qom or Najaf, or from more established British-Muslim institutions, like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Mosques and Imāms National Advisory Board (MINAB). Instead, the source of legitimacy for the *imāms* at the IMI is entirely through the mutual consensus and consent bestowed by the IMI community upon each other. In fact, the administrators and board members of the IMI have informed me of the challenges they face in making connections and earning public

support from other Muslim bodies and communities in the UK due to their unconventional ritual practices and lack of connection with sources of authority and legitimacy within mainstream Islam. The impediments faced by the IMI initially in getting women accepted as *imāms* by other mosques in the UK will be mentioned in the next chapter.

The lack of a specialised ritual leader or specialist at the IMI was not due to a lack of people who were recognised by the community as having religious and ritual expertise; neither was it due to a lack of individuals who were recognised as having achieved greater piety relative to other congregants, moral self-development, and religiosity, but it was due to a commitment to an egalitarian, collective, and co-constructive religious community model. This is an alternative approach to the traditional top-down approach that views the leader as a separate person, or group of people, from the followers. This kind of leadership model is often called 'shared leadership' in psychological and organisational behaviour studies on leadership models and refers to the type of leadership model where leadership is not a distinct, separated, and reserved role taken by certain individuals but a shared endeavour of the social group as a whole (Pearce et al. 2003).

In the case of the IMI, the role of the *imām* was usually performed by someone whose religious identity included being Muslim but there was no bar on which *type* of Muslim could lead the prayers or give the sermons. The issues of either 'legitimate birth' or descent, e.g., if someone is from a 'Sayyid lineage' (related to the Prophet Muhammad) or not, were never brought up or considered appropriate or relevant for deciding who should be the *imām* for a particular week. There was no 'underage' *imām* at the IMI when I was conducting my fieldwork, and the issue of age was not addressed by anyone. The question of 'sane' and 'just' was considered too subjective and vague to be used as the primary basis of selection

for the ritual roles, although these characteristics were indirectly assessed through the requirement that anyone taking a leadership role at the IMI should be sensitive to, and willing to, abide by the basic guidelines and values set by the Mosque. Specifically, anyone in an organisational or ritual role was expected to establish a safe and affirming space for the groups of Muslims that the IMI was established to serve, i.e., those who are, or perceive themselves to be, marginalised, unwelcome, or unsafe in other Muslim and non-Muslim British spaces.

It is important to restate that there are individuals who participate in IMI rituals as *khaṭīb* and *imām* with the expectation that their personal identity and the content of their sermons will *not* be linked to them in public. Both the organisational policy of the IMI and anthropological research ethics takes confidentiality seriously, especially in situations where there are perceived, or actual threats, to people because of the sensitive and volatile nature of debates around religious and personal identities and beliefs. Therefore, I have kept the identifying details of the *imāms* and *khaṭībs* at the IMI anonymous, even when they are public figures who are otherwise open regarding their personal and religious identities and beliefs.

Between February 2016 and August 2018 there were at least 20 different *khaṭībs* at IMI Friday prayers. These *khaṭībs* almost always also served as the *imām* for the *Jum'ah* prayers after their sermons. I will highlight some of the social identities of the ritual leaders at the IMI that are considered salient and relevant by the community. During this period—based only on either explicit self-identification or social cues and how others address a person—there were 12 *khaṭībs*/imāms who had 'woman' as part of their gender identity, with ten cis-gender women, one trans woman, and one non-binary femme person. There were

eight cis-gender male *khaṭībs*/*imāms*. There was an equal distribution of people who identified as 'straight' (heterosexual) and those who identified as part of the Queer spectrum, including—but not limited to—gay, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual people. I was aware of at least two individuals who had disabilities. In terms of ethnic breakdown in my data for the *khaṭībs*/*imāms*, two were black (Afro-Caribbean and African backgrounds), ten south Asian (specifically, Indian, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds), four Arab (specifically, Algerian and Egyptian backgrounds), one Kurdish (Turkish Kurd), one White (German), and two of mixed ethnic heritage. Although there was more diversity in all these demographic features in the congregation as a whole, the leadership roles broadly reflected the demographics of the congregation since they were voluntary roles that the congregants chose to undertake.

3.5. THE SERMONS AT THE IMI

Each *khaṭīb* designed their own sermons and were free to choose the topics to the extent that they did not violate the general IMI ethics and principles regarding inclusivity, non-violence, and respect for diversity. Although some *khaṭībs* chose to follow the traditional practices and conventions as closely and accurately as possible of their desired Islamic tradition, most chose to deliver the *khuṭbah* in more casual and unconventional styles and formats. Specifically, the *khuṭbah* sessions varied significantly in aspects like the degree of interaction and discussion between the *khaṭīb* and the congregants; the use of multimedia; whether classical Arabic was used when quoting from the Qur'ān; the length of the sermon; and whether the *khaṭīb* chose to remain seated while delivering the sermon or delivered it while standing, following the traditional practice.

This freedom and flexibility also meant that the IMI as an organisation expected each *khaṭīb* to make clear that the content of their sermons was their personal position and not necessarily reflective of or approved as the official position of the organisation. One of the board members of the IMI described this as part of the ethical and legal safeguarding standards they have set up at the IMI. She elaborated that this approach balances individual freedom of expression while protecting the organisation in terms of legal liabilities or media scrutiny when it comes to official organisational statements and actions.

Overall, all *khuṭbah* sessions were delivered in English with a smattering of other language terms and vocabulary (usually Arabic, Urdu, and Turkish), while the Qur'ānic verses were usually recited in Classical Arabic and then followed immediately with an English translation. Most people in the *khaṭīb* role would choose to sit on the prayer rug in front of the congregation rather than stand while delivering the sermon. Most *khaṭībs* would clearly state at the onset of their sermon if they wanted the congregants to be interactive, ask questions, share experiences, and discuss the topic of the sermon. The *khuṭbah* often followed the traditional format of being divided into two parts separated by a short break with the first part being longer than the second one.

Furthermore, the more traditional 'transmission model' of preaching *to* the congregation assumes a certain level of elevated knowledge and authority that is not facilitated by the 'shared leadership' model at the IMI. Therefore, most of the people who volunteered for the *khaṭīb* role at the IMI followed a 'constructivist' pedagogical model, one where people actively co-create knowledge and the *khaṭīb* acts more as a facilitator than as an expert on a topic (Phillips 1995). This can be seen in the frequent use of 'equalising' statements in the sermons: 'I am not an expert but just sharing my limited views and

knowledge'; 'Please take from my *khuṭbah* what is useful for you and discard what you do not find accurate or useful'; 'Any mistakes I make are mine alone and any benefit I provide is from Allah alone'; 'I apologise if I offend anyone and I ask for your forgivingness'; 'Please feel free to disagree with me'; 'Please ask questions'; 'I encourage you to discuss this sermon with me'; and 'I hope we can use this *khuṭbah* to learn from each other'.

3.5.1. Themes of the Sermons at the IMI

The themes and focus of the *khuṭbah* varied greatly due to the nature of the rotating *khaṭīb* role but often focused on events, concerns, and experiences that were the most relevant and timely to the congregants' daily lives. The *khaṭīb* often deliberately inculcated a sense of trust, openness, equality, and safety by sharing personal struggles and by acknowledging personal shortcomings. The *khaṭīb* would often bring up timely political events and concerns in the sermons but more personal life experiences and concerns were also frequently brought up, including loneliness, mental health, prejudice and discrimination, financial matters, and interpersonal relationship concerns. There was usually an emphasis in the sermons on acknowledging the experiences, perspectives, and concerns of Muslims who are more likely to seek this space for offering their prayers, whether due to actual or perceived exclusion from mainstream mosques or due to personal preferences, e.g., women; Muslims with minority gender and sexual/affectional identities; people with disabilities; black Muslims; refugees/immigrants; and Muslims from minority sects. Despite the large diversity and variety in the topics chosen for the *khuṭbah* there were some general patterns that could be detected, which I will elaborate upon below.

1. Psychological and Health-Based Frameworks of Spirituality

One of the themes that appeared frequently in different sermons was the use of psychology and mental health terms and concepts to describe spiritual and religious commitment and growth. Several sermons focused on topics related to mental health and linked religious concepts with psychological concepts and therapeutic techniques. For instance, mindfulness and meditation were practices that were frequently referred to as crucial tools for promoting mental health and consequently a deeper connection with Allah. One male *khaṭīb* delivered a sermon on meditation as a technique to not only manage anxiety, stress, and depression but also as a crucial technique to cultivate piety and a closer connection with Allah. As he stated, 'Allah is always present with us and the more we practise meditation and improve our mental health the more we can get in touch with The Divine within us.'

Other sermons focused on difficult emotions like grief, sadness, shame, and anger and melded religious and psychological concepts as resources that people can use to cope with these difficult emotions. This framework placed the struggles of the congregants in terms of mental, physical, and social health concerns and their religious beliefs and practice were conceptualised as key resources for achieving self-actualisation through healthy bodies, minds, spirits, relationships, careers, and social lives.

2. Virtue Ethics and Self-Actualisation

As with everything else at the IMI, there is tremendous diversity in the way people conceptualised ethics. Yet there was a dominant perspective within this community. The basic ethical questions of, '*Why* anyone should do the "right" thing?' and, '*How* anyone knows *what* the right thing is?' were approached from a perspective that focused more on this world rather than on the afterlife and the Divine. This framing of ethics often did not directly focus on an external Divine judgment and the repercussions—good or bad—initiated

by God based on those judgments. Instead, the focus was often more on the chains of cause and effect within this existential plane or the person's core (categorical) values that defined their lives and goals. The reasoning often began with, and stressed, how and why different decisions, beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours have consequences that are harmful to us, other people, other living beings, the earth, or even the universe conceived in either the scientific materialist sense or a more emotive spiritual sense.

This does not mean that ethics and moral rules and regulations were divorced from their link to Allah's commands and judgments, but that this framing tied Allah's Commands and Judgments of human conduct, attitudes, and beliefs to—as one *khaṭīb* put it in her Friday sermon—'the promotion of the welfare of, and the prevention of harm to, not only human beings but to the entire Creation of Allah'. Therefore, the way ethical decision-making, moral behaviours, and Islamic rules and regulations were encouraged and justified in the sermons was often either through reference to secular ethical philosophical reasonings, akin to consequentialist or deontological reasoning, or through more spiritual karmic worldviews, rather than directly to the more traditional Islamic approach of Divine commands, judgments, and the rewards (heaven) and punishments (hell) in the hereafter. Furthermore, some people viewed the Divine rewards and punishments mentioned in the Qur'ān as allegorical, or referring to real phenomenological events, i.e., states of mind, in this earthly plane.

As one man said in his *khuṭbah*, '*Taqwá*, which a lot of people translate as the fear of God, is to be mindful all the time of what we are doing, where life is taking us, and who we are surrounded by. Rather than instilling fear of our actions, we need to realise that every action has a reaction and there is no punishment, in the traditional sense. It is more of a kind of energetic conclusion and balance.'

Furthermore, the *khaṭīb* would frame a particular topic in terms of how 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' some belief, attitude, or behaviour is for a given entity, e.g., a person, relationship, organisation, society, ecosystem, etc. This framework does not primarily rest on another agent—in this case God—evaluating, judging, and calculating rewards and punishments, but mostly on human beings judging the consequences of any action, belief, idea, or value. The ends of cultivating virtues and ethical conduct was often identified as the self-actualisation of a person as understood as a psychological need in humans, thereby utilising a framework—although not usually referring directly to it—that emerges from the psychological literature on the 'hierarchy of needs' developed by Abraham Maslow (1987).

On the other hand, many people at the IMI conceptualised ethics in a less consequentialist and more deontological manner. For instance, one of the *khaṭībs* described her approach to religion and ethics as follows: 'Doing the right thing not because of what we will get out of it. That is ego talk. It is me, me, me! My needs and desires. Do it not because I will get points, you know for *thawāb*, that will give me an entry ticket into heaven but because you know it is the *right* thing to do'. Another *khaṭīb* stated, 'Truly becoming One with Allah is not about doing something so we can please Her[44] or avoid Her anger or to get something out of Her, but we want to do good because we love Her and everything in existence is Her.'

Bernard Williams (1987) describes this distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' as the difference between the universal, consistent, and non-contextual obligations and rules placed on individuals (morality) and the socially embedded, historically constituted, and

[44] It was common practice in IMI spaces to use feminine or gender-neutral pronouns to refer to Allah.

individually relative self-cultivation of virtues (ethics). Social groups have both aspects present: the social rules, norms, and obligations that feel like external pressures on the individual, even if they agree with them, and the internally driven individual practice of ethical self-cultivation or character development. In the case of IMI sermons the Islamic 'moral' norms and laws emerging from Divine Revelations and *fiqh* were highlighted but the emphasis was often on individual self-cultivation of 'virtues' based on each person's internal needs, values, and drives.

The congregants at the IMI felt that the focus of most mosques was on ethical discourse framed through the lens of extrinsic motivators that highlight the rewards and punishment (heaven and hell) linked to different behaviours. By contrast, the assumption that underlies many sermons at the IMI is that the congregants are driven by an intrinsic motivation to self-cultivate their virtues. The 'Tawhidi ontology' (will be touched upon in chapter 4) considers self-actualisation as the union and unity with Allah and that this is one of prime motivators for humans when they seek engagement with Islam (Wadud 1999). Hence, people work to cultivate their virtues and aim to do 'the right thing' partly to achieve self-actualisation and closeness to God, but partly also because they claim it is simply the correct thing to do inherently.

There were frequent encouragements for people to get in touch with what their core values are and to find their own meaning and purpose in life. Additionally, there were frequent encouragements for people to 'think for themselves,' based on their experiences and values, rather than accept ethical judgments from other people or other people's understanding of what Allah considers to be ethical or unethical conduct. However, the 'thinking for one's self' ethos still existed in a social context where most congregants formed

their independent meaning through the discussions, texts, and resources available to them in the IMI context and the individual beliefs and opinions tended to converge as people spent more time with each other and at IMI spaces.

3. Diversity and Other Faith Traditions

The sermons at the IMI are also distinctive in their use of references to other faith traditions, New Age spiritualism, and popular culture to deliver moral and theological lessons. Other Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Christianity—are referred to most often in the sermons but so are other religions that are often considered opposed to the Islamic worldview, like Buddhism and Hinduism. The *khaṭībs*/*imāms* would often highlight similarities and connections between other faith traditions and Islam.

In fact, the 'Tawhidi theology' of some congregants include the belief that not only do all religions contain some truths and value, but that they are all related to each other through a unified and unifying Transcendent Allah. Thereby, Allah unifies all people from different faith traditions or non-religious worldviews because everything emanates from the Divine Creator. For instance, Saud, who was one of the regular IMI *khaṭībs*, referred to a *ḥadīth* in the *ḥadīth* collection, *Musnad Ahmad*, compiled by Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal where the Prophet is reported to have stated that Allah has sent down 124,000 prophets to guide humanity. Saud then referred to the Qur'ānic *Sūrah Ar-Ra'd* (13. 7), where it is written that 'every nation of every time has received a messenger'. He added a reference to a *ḥadīth* (*ḥadīth* number 3954) in the *ḥadīth* collection *Al-Mustadrak* written by Hakim al-Nishapuri, where the Prophet is reported to have said, 'I feel a cool breeze from Al-Hind'. Using these Islamic textual resources, Saud made the point: 'This opens up a whole new field for research, collaboration, and unity between different spiritual paths.' This formed a theme in

most of his sermons as he explored Islamic principles, beliefs, and rituals and what he considered their equivalences in other faith traditions. For instance, one of his sermons explored the ways in which yoga and *ṣalāh* are parallel activities and rituals with similar effects on practitioners. In that sermon he went through the different poses during *ṣalāh* and then described what, according to him, their equivalence is in yoga postures. For instance, *Qiyām* is equivalent to the mountain pose while *rukū* is equivalent to the forward bend posture in yoga.

The reference to other faith traditions was often made both to underscore the universality of the Islamic message and to highlight the validity of multiple spiritual paths and perspectives. An example of this would be a male *khaṭīb* who chose the topic of 'labels' to speak about how we should be wary of judging people's character based on their religious or other social identificatory labels. The *khaṭīb* said that he would quote from various sources to 'emphasise the universality of this message', and then quoted Jesus, Muhammad, Rabbi Hillel, the Hindu text Garuda Purana, the Dalai Lama, Confucianism, and even Albert Einstein. Similarly, he created a sense of Muslim-ness as being broader than Islamic faith when he stated that his sermon is not only for those who identify as Muslims in the congregation, but to everyone of all faith traditions and none because, he stated, 'A good Muslim is a good human being—plain and simple. The qualities of being a good Muslim are not to be found in the length of one's beard or how much skin one covers up. It is not in the number of prayers that you perform, nor whether you wear a turban or a hijab. The qualities of being a good Muslim are to be found in your behaviour, your love and empathy for your fellow human beings.'

Another *khaṭīb* brought up the concept of reincarnation and made a case for the compatibility of the process of reincarnation with Islamic belief. He acknowledged the novelty of this in contemporary Islamic belief by stating that reincarnation is a concept that 'you probably won't hear in a mosque, and you will not hear this in the Muslim world. However, I would just like to raise openness to the idea of the transference of life from one body into another.' He followed this by describing historical sects and Islamic scholars and mystics who believed in reincarnation as well as a few contemporary Muslim sects and thinkers, like the Alawi, that still have aspects of this concept in their spiritual worldview.

During Christmas time in 2017, one of the female *khaṭībs* delivered a sermon focused on Christmas. She described how one of the *imāms* at her local mosque had condemned Christmas as a pagan and un-Islamic ritual that all Muslims should stay away from at all costs. The *imām* stressed that Muslims should refrain from wishing 'Merry Christmas' to those celebrating the holiday, not exchange Christmas cards and/or gifts, sing carols, allow their children to participate in school nativity plays or other Christmas-related school events, or have a Christmas tree at home. The *khaṭīb* said that she finds this perspective not only mean-spirited but also un-Islamic because it is based on fear. She asked the congregation to think beyond the materialistic aspects of Christmas and take ownership of the tradition by finding personalised ways to celebrate it that align with their faith. For instance, she shared that she considers Christmas to be an important time for reconnecting and spending quality time with friends, neighbours, and family members. She said that volunteering at homeless shelters during the season or inviting someone who may be alone or feeling lonely over for dinner are meaningful and fulfilling ways for Muslims to celebrate Christmas. The *Khaṭīb* encouraged the congregation to be active members of their local communities and participate

in Christmas-related events because Muslims should be part of the multi-cultural and religious societies that they live in rather than segregate from others.

In most of IMI's events, whether religious rituals or conferences, there are usually a few regular attendees and participants who do not identify as Muslim. Therefore, the references to other faith traditions also construct a religious space that is meant to welcome and serve the needs of a congregation that is composed of not only Muslims but people from other faith traditions or none. Furthermore, even those who had a Muslim background found a multi-confessional approach to Islam more appealing due to their personal trajectory of approaching Islam in personalised ways. For instance, one of the regular congregants, Sameer, stated that he preferred coming to IMI prayers to meet his spiritual needs because of its approach to finding common truths between all religions: "For me, it was leaving Islam and experimenting with other spiritual texts that brought me back to Islam. And I understand how…that might be psychological conditioning because it's what's familiar to the brain. But in the end, there's a few common truths and trends that all the religions are pointing at, and whatever, however you want to get to God or to the Ultimate Truth, all these religions are different vehicles. So, it was easy for me to get into this. Yeah, it was easy for me to get in a vehicle that I already knew how to drive."

4. Keeping Things Relevant

A survey of the different sermon topics at the IMI demonstrates that the focus is often on topics that are related to the personal lives of the congregants or important contemporary and local news and issues. Most sermons explicitly link any Islamic concept or reference to something that the congregants deal with in their own lives or issues that are relevant to their social context. The most common topics is 'social justice' which refers to all the topics that

address local and global inequalities and injustices among people along various social dimensions. For instance, policing and race/ethnicity was a topic that came up frequently in both the sermons as well as other discussions at the IMI. This topic was frequently in the media and popular culture debates and addressing it during sermons made them timely, engaging, and relevant to the congregation. No matter what the sermon topic was the *khaṭīb* tried to stress how it is directly relevant to the lives of the congregants and not just an abstract religious concept or a purely theological or ritualistic concern.

Other examples of topics that show the linking of religious worship and belief directly with the lives and daily concerns of the congregants are climate change; social media; consumerism; religious persecution; nationalism and Brexit; gender and sexual diversity; female leadership; mental health; grief; healing; springtime; and hope.

3.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has brought out the IMI's core values related to its attempt at providing an alternative space where members of the Muslim community who feel excluded or unsafe in other religious spaces can feel safe and empowered. I described the symbolic geography of the mosque itself (the absence of hierarchical structures like the lectern), the congregational Friday prayers, the role of non-traditional sermonisers (women, etc.), the style of the sermons (interactive and persuasive rather than authoritarian) as well as their themes—inclusiveness, egalitarianism, good psychological health and respectful reference to other belief systems—to make the point that the performativeness of the ritual not only reflects key values and goals of this community but makes them real through acts of self- and community-formation. One major distinguishing feature of IMI Friday prayers, which has been mentioned briefly, is

the privileging of female leadership. This questioning and revision of gender roles and the nature of gender identity in sacred spaces is what I take up in the next chapter.

4. Gender Identity and Progressive Muslim Organisations

'I was shaking with emotion when I first prayed in a congregation led by a female *imām*!' recalled Salima, a London-based, cis-gender, Muslim woman of South Asian descent in her early 30s. Salima was one of the board members and *imāms* at the IMI at the time of my fieldwork and was one of the most active members of the community. She had been involved at the IMI from its inception and was involved in all aspects of its operations. She spoke about her journey from a relatively conventional approach to Islam towards the one she eventually came to advocate. One of the most formative and crucial reasons for her religious transformation was the experience of praying in a mixed-gender congregation being led by a female *imām*. This led to her actively seeking Muslim communities where female ritual leadership was not only acceptable but actively promoted. This search led her to meet the founders of the IMI and she became an active member of the community.

Another response to my question from Alia, a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin as to why she was so satisfied with the IMI is as follows:

> I had a lot of trauma growing up but there was one thing which consoled me and that was Islam. I did not know Arabic, but I would chant the verses of the Qur'an which soothed me. God, I knew, would understand.

> But the mosque in my neighbourhood was run by a *maulvi* that did not take kindly to my coming to the mosque regularly. The facilities for women were almost non-existent and hardly any women attended. The *maulvi* gave sermons often about how sinful women were and on divine punishment on women for tempting Adam, and men in general. We women seemed to be mainly responsible for all sins. Of course, the congregation, especially women who were very few anyway, never joined any discussion about the running of the mosque. There was, however, a mosque management committee which was all male, but I did not know anybody in it.
>
> One day somebody told me about the Inclusive Mosque and, as I lived in London, I came there. This was a new experience. When I first entered it, I found the lectern and the *mehrab*, the hall marks of the mosque I used to attend, missing. Then there was no proper *maulvi* and, above all, there was no restriction on where anyone stood. I was overwhelmed when I found that the prayer leader was a woman. I started coming more often and loved the sheer feeling of liberation. I heard learned *Sheikhs* talking to us and not just quoting Arabic to make us feel as if we were sinners. The prayer leaders changed and there was an atmosphere of equality and joy as people ate and we discussed all sorts of issues. And I found that if there was a house of worship then this was it. There were all God's creatures in it and they were all equally valued. I made friends with a transgender person who found peace there just as I had. I also learned that we, people who were not learned in anything, could also speak and be heard. So, to your question of what the IMI means to me I say: It is the one place where I can talk to God as if I am talking to the greatest caregiver of all; as if I am talking to a loving mother; to a strong father; to the one I rely upon to make life easy for me. That is what it means.

This aspect of female ritual leadership is one of the key areas where Progressive Muslim communities and organisations diverge from the traditional practice of the Muslim community. Furthermore, questions related not only to gender roles but to gender identities are also increasingly becoming pressing within Progressive Muslim discourses as the broader British culture also grapples with these topics. This chapter will investigate two aspects of how the Progressive Muslim spaces I worked with differ from traditional Muslim practices related to gender: women's role and place in mosques and the acknowledgment and accommodation of a spectrum of gender identities.

In the first part of this chapter, I will take up the way Muslim women in the Inclusive Mosque Initiative advocate for equality in different spheres of mosques through not only practice but through a feminist reading of Islamic theology and history. The issue of women's place in prayers is multifaceted as it not only addresses female ritual leadership but also other aspects: female involvement in mosque decision-making bodies; women's access to mosques; the quality and state of prayer spaces and resources for women in mosques; and the spatial arrangement of men and women during prayers.

In the second, I will first introduce the theoretical concept of queerness and then go on to write about non-cisgender people (trans, intersex, genderqueer, non-binary, agender, and other gender identities) and how their involvement in Islamic rituals not only shifts the gendered power relations between men and women but the operation and significance of the social category of 'gender' itself. One of the key changes resulting from the acknowledgment and accommodation of a spectrum of gender identities is the displacement of gender as the basis for arranging congregants behind an *imām* during prayers. To comprehend my interlocutors' understanding of gender and power I begin with the '*Tawhidi* perspective', advocated by Amina Wadud, which provides the theological framework for a gender egalitarian model of Islamic ritual leadership that is often referred to by Progressive Muslims advocating female ritual leadership and mixed gender prayers.

4.1. THE *TAWHIDI* ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

One of the underlying theological perspectives that were present in most sermons at the IMI can be called the *Tawhidi* perspective: the belief in the central organising concept of Divine Oneness. This Divine Oneness represents both the absolute Oneness of the Creator and the Unity and Connection of everything that is Created—whether sentient or not. The *Tawhidi* perspective explores the multiple ways these two domains of Reality are merged or

differentiated from each other and the consequences of this Oneness, particularly for gender hierarchies.

This theological principle prioritises the connectedness of all things and is exemplified by one of its most influential advocates: Amina Wadud. She is an African-American Muslim theologian and Islamic Studies professor who has written extensively about the role and place of women in Islam from this perspective (Wadud 1999). Wadud is one of the key advisors, and a frequent guest speaker/*imām*, for the IMI and was instrumental in guiding and supporting the two founders in implementing their idea of an inclusive mosque in London. Hence, her *Tawhidi* theology and hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān is often reflected in the perspectives of congregants and leaders at the Mosque. Most members of the congregation do not explicitly state that they have a *Tawhidi* perspective or define or categorise their theological and ethical approach to Islam. However, the way they approach, interpret, and practise their faith demonstrates their alignment with this perspective.

For Wadud the concept of *Tawhid* does not only refer to the theological claim about the Unity of Allah and the monotheism of Islam, but is also a hermeneutic approach to the Qur'ān where an emphasis is made on interpreting verses in relation to the broader oneness of its message, i.e., its underlying themes, principles, values, and coherence. Additionally, Wadud highlights the ethical and political significance that emerges from the *Tawhidi* paradigm. Crucially, she links the traditional meaning of *Tawhid* as referring primarily to the Oneness of God to a social, more political meaning: 'God is one, God is unique, God is united and God unites all things' (Wadud 2008: 437). The last part of this statement is crucial for the political significance of *Tawhid* as it imbues the Created with the sacred essence of

the Creator and places all beings within a state of 'horizontal reciprocity' with each other. This *Tawhidi* perspective views all human beings as equally worthy before God with an inherent sacredness attached to their existence and soul (Riyani 2017: 306). This provides the ontological background for social and political goals that seek to advance the equality, harmony, and connectedness amongst all creation. This is often linked with placing environmentalism, egalitarian socio-legal norms, celebration of diversity, and social justice as central components of an Islamic worldview. Hence, it is considered a kind of 'liberation theology' where all hierarchies that assume any essential inequality in worth, dignity, and value are disavowed as contradicting the principle of all beings being equal parts of the Sacred Oneness. Hence, women are considered equal to men in not just social but also spiritual domains, which makes their presence and leadership in Islamic rituals an important aspect of practising Islam.

Some people did explicitly mention the *Tawhidi* perspective in their sermons. For instance, Farah, an ethnically Bengali, cis-gender, Muslim woman in her early 30s from East London, named her theological perspective at the beginning of her sermon:

> The perspective from which I talk about the Qur'ān and Islam is deeply *Tawhidi*. So, I look at the Unity and Union in Islam very much from that perspective, and also from a liberation theology point of view. And what that means is: looking at how we can move away from the ways in which the Qur'ān, or our religious texts, have been read from positions of power, whether it's colonialism, whether it's patriarchy, whether it's homophobia—all the ways in which we read from a position of power. Moving away from that and treating the ego…

4.2. WOMEN'S PLACE IN PRAYER

As mentioned earlier, the IMI was established to provide an alternative to the gendered inequalities its pioneers perceived as prevalent in Muslim faith institutions and religious

practices. The motivation for establishing IMI occurred in a context of increasing debates about women and their roles, access, and position in mosques and rituals.

In many UK mosques women are discouraged from joining the prayers on the grounds that it is desirable that they should pray at home, especially those with South Asian and Ḥanafīh majorities and leadership (Aly 2018: 2). And even in mosques that welcome female worshippers they usually pray in a separate room, and never lead congregational prayers. A 2009 survey of mosques in England and Wales conducted by the Charity Commission reported that women form a part of the congregation—mostly for the Friday congregational prayers—in only half of the mosques surveyed, while less than 15% of the mosques reported having some kind of managerial or governance positions occupied by women (BMG Research 2009). More than a quarter of mosques in the UK have no facilities for women while in the remainder access is often restricted and the space provided is inadequate (Sherwood 2018). There has been a growing movement led by Muslim women within the UK to increase women's access and representation in mosques. For instance, the Open My Mosque (OMM) campaign was launched by a group of Muslim women in 2015 after they had experienced being stopped from praying in mosques due to no or inadequate facilities (Open My Mosque n.d.). Similarly, the Muslim Women's Council in Bradford announced in 2015 that they will be building the UK's first 'women-governed mosque' which will be a permanent space for women to offer the five daily prayers while the congregational prayers will be led by a male *imām* (Muslim Women's Council n.d.). Due to the increasing pressure from Muslim women in the UK to improve access, facilities, leadership, and governance positions in mosques, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)

launched the ‘Women in Mosques Development Programme’ in 2018 to accelerate the inclusion of female leaders in mosque committees (Muslim Council of Britain n.d.).

The IMI responded to these movements and debates to provide a prayer space where women could have equal access to the mosque as well as serve as ritual leaders. While the issue of providing equal access, resources, and more power to women in mosque managerial positions has gained legitimacy from influential Islamic institutions in the UK and abroad, the issue of female ritual leadership is much more controversial. I will describe some of the mainstream *fiqh* positions around this issue that are used to justify contemporary practices and then look at the ways some contemporary Progressive Muslim female *imāms* have developed alternative norms.

4.2.1. Islamic Approaches to Women and Prayers

The gender roles, hierarchies, and spatial positions in public prayer spaces that the different schools of *fiqh* specify are justified with reference to the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* literature. One of the well-attested *ḥadīth* in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim collection states that ‘the best [prayer] row for men is the first and the worst is the last; the best row for women is the last and the worst is the first’ (Katz 2013: 181). Another *ḥadīth* found in Sunni collections advocates ‘the notoriously more restrictive advice that a woman’s bedchamber or closet is a better place for her to pray than the rest of the house’ (Calderini 2021: 80). In keeping with these textual imperatives, within most contemporary Sunni and Shī‘i communal prayer practice women are either in a separate prayer room, or they pray in the rows behind men. But since the reason provided by religious scholars for gender segregation during prayers is to protect women’s modesty and prevent men from getting sexually distracted, this has also been achieved through other gendered spatial arrangements. For instance, there have been ‘long

established practices around the Muslim world…[that] separate men and women on opposite sides of the room with or without a physical barrier such a *mashrabiyya* screen' (Silvers & Elewa 2010: 162).

The consensus opinion of the Mālikī school is that women cannot lead prayers under any circumstances and prayers behind a woman would be invalid. This ruling is linked to women's voice also being considered '*awrah* in the prayer context and hence capable of producing *fitnah*. Similarly, the *Ḥanafīh* consensus opinion consider female ritual leadership of other women undesirable even if the prayers performed by congregants in such a context can technically still be valid. Although, at least theoretically, there is an exception: funeral prayers. Since funerary prayers are regarded as collective or social rather than an individual obligation, women could lead not only other women but even men (Calderini 2021: 68). In the Shāfiʿī school a woman can legally lead other women in congregational prayers, and this could even be considered desirable, but with the provisos that the woman leads from the middle rather than the front and dresses according to the traditional norms of modesty. Furthermore, given the compulsory nature of prayers some jurists stated that prayers performed in less-than-ideal-situations, such as a woman leading from the front or being unveiled, could still be valid if an alternative is not available (ibid, 70). This is also the case in the Ḥanbalī school and the Shīʻi Jaʿfarī (2021: 78). Furthermore, the Ḥanbalī school considers it permissible for a woman to lead men in congregational prayer but only in the specific context of nighttime prayers *tarāwīḥ* in Ramadan but, again, this is not preferred and is only valid if a qualified man is unavailable to do so (Katz 2013: 181). Hence, there are differences in the legal schools regarding the permissibility of female ritual leadership, but

the consensus remains that women cannot lead a mixed-gender public congregational prayer, particularly the Friday prayers (ibid. 181).

In the IMI, on the other hand, people who are under-represented or not allowed to act as ritual leaders in other mosques, not only women but also trans, non-binary, disabled, black, and/or working-class congregants, were given a priority to lead in the ritual roles. Although, cis-gender males, who are also well-represented, would often end up actively volunteering for these roles. Furthermore, not only are the congregants free to decide where they wanted to stand, or sit, during the congregational prayers, they are also encouraged to occupy the very positions from which other mosques would exclude them. For instance, in the Friday congregation I mentioned in the last chapter, the prayer volunteers would often have to encourage female congregants to come to the front rows to counteract a tendency of women, especially those who were new to the IMI, to stand in the last couple of rows. As mentioned already, this tendency reflects the usual Muslim communal prayer set-up when prayers are held in one space with both men and women, i.e., women usually pray behind the men in this context or to their left-side to ensure they are out of the sight of men during the prayers.

Importantly, the *ḥadīth* traditions that describes Umm Waraqa being instructed by the Prophet to act as *imām* and lead the people of her household (*dār*)[45] is often a touchstone for contemporary female *imāms* who seek to establish an Islamic history for women leading mixed-gender congregations: 'Today, those who advocate the right of women to lead men alongside women in prayer invoke Umm Waraqa's *ḥadīth* in the Ibn Saʿd version' (Calderini

[45] For a detailed analysis of the various versions and sources of *ḥadīth* related to Umm Waraqa's prayer leadership, and the contested meaning of the word '*dār'* ranging from private household, neighbourhood, to village, see Chapter 3 in Calderini's book '*Women as Imāms'* (2021).

2021: 102). Thus, the case for female ritual leadership is made through applying different types of textual hermeneutical techniques, as described in Chapter 2, to interpret Islamic sources, like the Qu'ran and *ḥadīth*. The recourse to *ḥadīth* and Islamic history, as well as theology, are meant to persuade other Muslims about the 'correct' form and purpose of the ritual of congregational prayers.

4.2.2. Women Imāms of Mixed-Gender Congregations

Since the key feature of the IMI is women leading the congregation during prayers, one of its co-founders described the initial struggle and hesitation they had about establishing such a mosque due to the majority position of Islamic authorities on its non-permissibility. She described numerous discussions with other like-minded Muslim women about the need, legitimacy, and safety of establishing this type of mosque. Over the course of these discussions, they learned more about the theological and historical basis for such ritual practice in Islam as well as contemporary precedence of such prayers. They eventually decided to go ahead with this project after being encouraged by Amina Wadud who advised them to follow their beliefs and convictions and focus on the needs of the people who they want to serve rather than waiting for permission from the mainstream Islamic scholars and jurists on this issue.

This endorsement and support was significant not only because Wadud provided a supportive theological framework for this organisation but also due to the precedent she set by leading a widely publicised mixed-gender Friday prayer held at St John the Divine cathedral in New York City in 2005 (Hammer 2010). Although this was not the first mixed gender congregation led by a female *imām* in contemporary times it was one of the most visible and prominent. The prominence of this ritual performance was due to the time and place of the event—New York City only a few years after 9/11—as well as the prominent

public identity of Amina Wadud. Furthermore the 2005 New York prayer had been preceded by an online publication that acted as a form of announcement for the event. The online article was written by Nevin Reda and utilised Qur'ānic passages, selected *aḥadīth* (particularly the one mentioning Umm Waraqa), and legal arguments from early Sunni schools that are now extinct (Reda 2005).

In the *khuṭbah* at this prayer Wadud reiterated the *Tawhidi* paradigm mentioned above and the gender symmetry it implied, and significantly, made use of female and gender-neutral pronouns when referring to Allah—a practise that is normative at the IMI. The novelty of the event led to it being covered extensively by the media and then it gained even more prominence due to high-profile responses from senior Muslim scholars and jurists. For instance, a collection of *fatāwá* on the topic of women leading prayers, which included contributors from prestigious Islamic universities such as al-Azhar, was published online soon after the New York prayer claiming to represent the contemporary consensus (*ijmā'*) of Islamic legal scholars against the validity of women leading congregational Friday prayers and mixed-gender congregations (AMJA 2005). Similarly, several *fatāwá* on this matter were released throughout the Muslim world, including a highly-publicised one from the Indonesian Scholars' Assembly declaring leadership of women of a mixed gender congregation as being *ḥarām* (Najwah et al. 2022), the Moroccan Fatwá Council issued an edict against women leading prayers in mosques (Arbaoui 2015), as well as the Malaysian state's Islamic Religious Council declaring Wadud's teaching and work as deviations (Wadud 2014). Similarly, when the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque was founded in Berlin in 2017 by Seyran Ateș, a female *imām*, which held Friday prayers with Seyran leading a congregation of men and unveiled women praying side by side it led to so many queries

about the Islamic basis of this ritual that the Egyptian government's *Dār al-Iftå* felt it was necessary to release an official public statements against such prayers (Sakr 2017).

Despite the opposition to this practise from centres of Islamic authority, Amina Wadud's New York prayer established 'a significant precedent' that other female *imāms* started to refer to in legitimising their own ritual practices (Calderini 2021: 163). The New York prayer is referred to as an inspiration and model by several new mosques with female *imāms* and/or mixed gender congregations that became more established thereafter in some Western countries, like USA, UK, Denmark, Germany, and Canada. The founders of IMI also refer to the precedent set by Amina Wadud and base the legitimacy of their practices on the authority embodied in the academic and theological stature of Wadud, which represents 'quite a novel type of religious authoritativeness if compared to the one of established and traditionally trained scholars of institutional bodies' (Calderini 2021: 174).

4.2.3. Feminine Leadership Style?

The approach to leadership that is evident at the IMI self-consciously links a non-hierarchical model of leadership with women in leadership positions. Furthermore, the style of leadership practised and promoted at IMI is understood by the congregants and leaders as 'Islamic' in nature as they justify these styles through reference to the examples set by the Prophet Muhammad and to beliefs of how God exercises their own Divine and Omnipotent leadership over all creation. Hence, the aim of promoting women as leaders in ritual and religious contexts is viewed to align religious practise with Divine ideals of leadership as well as a type of gender performance that links leadership and power to the social category of 'woman'.

Leadership is a concept that can be defined in several different ways depending on one's methodology and area of focus. A useful starting point is the definition advanced by 84 social scientists from 56 countries during a conference in Canada in 1994: leadership is the ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organisation of which they are members (House & GLOBE 2004). When it comes to a faith-based organisation, leadership is often tied to not only the worldly success of the organisation and its members but also transcendental and spiritual goals. Therefore, the leadership at the IMI is partly about being task-oriented and successfully running the organisation and its specific rituals and events, and partly about the more humanistic endeavour of inspiring spiritual growth in people.

The field of leadership studies used to primarily focus on more transactional and task-oriented type of leadership styles, associated with masculine leadership styles, that emphasise rewards and punishments for followers based on their performance on the objectives and goals set by the leader. From the 1970s onwards the field of leadership research started focusing on what is known as 'transformational leadership' (Burns 1978). This leadership style is defined by its focus on charismatic leadership that inspires followers to identify their own goals and self-actualisation needs and motivates them to pursue them. It is focused on the quality of the relationship between the leader and the 'followers', and the emotional intelligence required to 'transform' people to better themselves and achieve shared goals.

The 'social role theory' of leadership conceptualises leadership as a social role that carries with it a range of expectations, skills, norms, and values which vary with the social category of the person occupying it (Eagly 1987; Eagly & Johnson 1990). Women have been

shown to demonstrate skills related to transformational leadership styles more than men. For instance, a cross-cultural study of 27 countries found that women leaders are more likely to prefer charismatic, participative, and team-oriented leadership approaches (Paris et al. 2009). This is partly because of gender role socialisation and partly for the practical reason of overcoming 'the dilemma of role incongruity', i.e., reducing the negative perceptions and repercussions from exercising leadership roles, which are still perceived as more 'masculine', while conforming to the expectations of their gender roles and reducing the negative reactions and perceptions (Eagly et al. 2003: 574).

According to the gender-stereotypic expectations within modern organisational contexts, agentic leadership styles that are task-oriented, hierarchical (autocratic), and directive are seen as more aligned with norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity while communal (democratic), participative, relationship-oriented leadership styles are seen more aligned with traditional conceptions of femininity. The leadership style of an individual is the result of multiple factors, including the internalisation of social role expectations and the level of external social pressure and controls exerted on people to conform to these gender role expectations. Research has shown that not only are women expected to exercise leadership in a more participative and non-hierarchical fashion, but they are also perceived negatively and penalised if they exercise a more typically masculine style of leadership (Eagly et al. 2003: 570). The level of effectiveness of each leadership style varies tremendously based on contextual variables but there seems to be evidence that in contemporary, highly complex settings that require more self-direction, information-processing, and flexibility the transformational leadership style is often more effective (Eagly et al. 2003: 573; Eagly & Carli 2003).

My interlocutors were keenly conscious of how gender links to leadership styles and expectations as they critiqued male-dominated leadership structures and positions in religious domains. The argument that was often presented was that the gender of those in positions of religious authority is important not only due to inequality and discrimination based on gender but also due to the impact of gender on how a religious community understands its theology and practises its beliefs. Hence, Progressive Muslim conceptions of leadership and the politics of advocating for female *imāms* is crucially tied to assumptions, claims, and performance of specific conceptions of masculinity and femininity. These conceptions are contested and not immutable or 'natural' and the practice of women leading prayers represents an example of how changes in power relations at the local grass-root levels—the micropolitics of power—change broader theories and concepts of not only leadership but also conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Britton 2000).

One of the key principles at the IMI has been to have women in positions of power in the organisations. The board for the organisation is female only as they want to make sure that leadership positions are given to women in the organisation. Similarly, although men participated in all the other roles and areas of the organisation, there was an emphasis on encouraging women to take active roles, especially as *imāms*. This is considered crucial not only as a balance to the domination of men in other mosque boards but also due to a conscious recognition that the politics of inclusion can work in ways that replicate gender hierarchies.

For instance, a study of an LGBT+ Christian Church described the transformation of the church from a gender egalitarian arrangement to a traditional gender hierarchical one. The change came under the leadership of a gay male pastor who was trained by the Southern

Baptist Convention but because of his sexuality left them and joined this queer-affirming church (Sumerau et al. 2015). He assigned chores and duties according to traditional gender role expectations and kept leadership roles restricted to males. These changes in leadership practices were justified through a focus of theology on moral purity, judgment, sin, and order under a God that was increasingly described in masculine terms. Specifically, while earlier congregants were encouraged to choose their own word when referring to God and the word 'Creator' was preferred in congregational prayers, the new pastor used the word 'Father' to refer to God and the congregants were referred to as the 'children' of God. This led to a dramatic change in the demographics of the church as three-quarters of all women left, while the gay male population increased by 20 percent (2015: 316). The women who remained in the church supported these changes for different reasons, with a commonly reported reason being a sense of greater legitimacy, respectability, safety, and 'normality'.

This is an example of the process of 'homonormativity' (for details see Chapter 5), which describes the way queer politics of inclusion and respectability in mainstream practices and institutions can result in the recurrence of traditional hierarchical values and power relations where assimilation is allowed for some sexual minorities (mostly white, male, middle class) in exchange for a validation of the broader status quo (Duggan 2003). Within the Progressive Muslim networks there are different tendencies and positions that reflect similar approaches to politics: focused on inclusion within the dominant normative institutions and frameworks, focus on seeking change that transforms the dominant normative frameworks and institutional power relations, and most often, a mix between these two poles. Within the IMI, there is a keen awareness of the ways the larger secular-liberal discourses around inclusion and diversity in the UK can lead to homonormative

assimilationist politics that exclude religious Muslim subjectivities in general, as well as specifically marginalising Muslim women, working-class Muslims, trans, and gender non-conforming people. On the other hand, seeking recognition and assimilation within the mainstream British Muslim institutions also runs the risk of defusing and co-opting the more radical and exploratory aspects of their ritual and theological work. The style of leadership that is promoted at IMI, a more transformational rather than transactional orientation, is considered key to its core aim of promoting gender justice and equity in Islamic discourses and practices.

Furthermore, the type of relationship and leadership model that is normative in an organisation reflects the type of views that are present concerning the behaviours and purpose of other agentic beings, in this case of God and God-Human interactions. The 'feminine' leadership style at IMI shifts the focus away from leader-centric perspectives to a more interactive and communal perspective of the leader-follower dynamic, which also impacts the vision of the relationship between God and humanity. Specifically, the hierarchical perspective where the leader sets tasks and rules and the followers are evaluated based on their ability to meet those leader-initiated goals and rules changes to a nurturance model that is focused on the self-actualisation needs and goals of the followers with the leader facilitating, guiding, and inspiring that process.

The *imāms* at the IMI often claim that the purpose of God's rules and commands is not about God requiring obedience or submission from human beings for its own sake or needing humanity's worship or recognition. Instead, the purpose is to create a better world for humans and other living beings. As described earlier in the themes of the sermons, the evaluations of human actions are less focused on the reaction and evaluation of God to them

and more on the consequences for those actions for the growth and welfare of God's creation. As one *imām* said: 'Humans cannot meet the needs of Allah and She does not need us. It is us humans who need Her. Her guidance for us is not about Her. It is about us. She is not angry, jealous, offended, happy, or anything because of human behaviours. She guides us and is there for us because of Her love for us and wanting the best for us.'

Therefore, the egalitarian model of leadership at the IMI together with its focus on mutual self-development reflects a worldview and approach to not only how the organisation and society should be run but also a theological view of the relationship of God to human beings. In this view the purpose of the leader-follower or God-human dynamic is the facilitation of the self-actualisation of the human-follower and the tasks, rules, and goals set by the God-leader are means to that end.

4.3. QUEERING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES: NON-CISGENDER MUSLIMS

As mentioned earlier, queer is a term that is currently widely used as an umbrella term that is inclusive of all segments of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. It is increasingly used to denote a more 'progressive' synonym for gay. The term also has a more critical, 'radical', and counter-normative use emerging from social justice activism and queer theory. In these contexts, the term 'queer' is meant to resist and transcend the limits of essentialising binary categories, e.g., homo/heterosexual and male/female, and the ways in which these mainstream categorisations can exclude and reduce the specificity, materiality, embodiment, and variety of sexual practices, relationships, affective and embodied dispositions, and how people categorise themselves and others in practice (Ahmed 2014: 146).

What is the 'Queer Muslim Question'? Rahul Rao, writing on the international politics of queer rights in the contemporary era, observes that the 'Queer Question' and the more narrow 'Queer Muslim Question' is 'not only adding its weight to the long-running Woman Question, but also transforming it' (2014: 200). Just like the various 'querulous constituencies' that have historically played large roles in the dynamics of international and domestic politics—like the Jewish Question, the Woman Question, the Question of Palestine, etc.—queer people are increasingly being shifted into central figures in politics at all levels. This is due to the Queer Question being invested with multiple meanings and sentiments not just by queer people but, crucially, by and for nations and mainstream, or dominant, segments of societies. Whether those meanings are accepting or rejecting of *queerness* depends on the role the figure of the queer person plays in the construction of the national or cultural discourses but, either way, the Queer Question itself has been gaining importance in these discourses.

The Queer Question is primarily about grappling with the existence of *queerness*—in general non-normativity but, more specifically, same-sex desire and relationships and fluid and diverse gender identities and expressions. The socio-historical forces that have led to an acknowledgment and construction of the constituency of 'queer people,' poses challenges as well as opportunities for the established heteronormative order of societies. Similarly, the Queer Muslim Question centres around questions related to the compatibility of queer subjectivities, identities, and relationships with Islam, together with the related questions of how these non-heteronormative and genderqueer subjectivities, can or should be integrated and expressed within Muslim communities. As soon as these questions are posed it becomes clear that they do not represent niche issues only of interest for those who experience

themselves as 'queer,' but the implications of these questions are far broader as they trouble and 'excite'[46] core categories, beliefs, practices, institutions, rules, and relations that structure the discursive field of Islam and the connections of Muslims—whether of care, control, or both.

4.3.1. Queer Identities and Progressive Muslim Organisations

Gender identities that fall outside the cisgender binary of male and female are either invisible, tolerated, or actively excluded and rejected in many Muslim spaces. Even where there is an acceptance for non-cisgender people in ritual spaces their existence, needs, and leadership are not centred in most Muslim spaces. I will describe spaces where the acknowledgment of non-binary gender identities in ritual spaces lead to changes in religious practice and discourse. First, I will describe a progressive Sufi community in London and how an intersex Muslim revealing their existence highlighted assumptions related to gender in a religious community that aims to be gender egalitarian. This disruption was received by others in the community in varying ways—both as a threat and an opportunity for change—depending on the unique constellation of individual and group dynamics and positionalities.

Furthermore, this episode formed the impetus for the formation of another Progressive Muslim organisation in London, the London Queer Muslims (LQM), which has been introduced in chapter 1. The group focuses on textual hermeneutics of Islamic sources to construct a queer Islamic discourse to complement, and in many cases challenge, what

[46] I use the concept of 'excitability' here to refer to Judith Butler's theory of performativity or the power of language to 'excite' social forces in ways that brings about change in the world, i.e., language as social action. Following theories on the embodiment of gender through repeated (iterability) performance of gender roles and norms, Butler explored the way performativity functions in similar ways in political discourse to create our complex social worlds in ways that seem 'natural' and 'common sensical'. At the same time, due to the unstable nature of performativity, resignification and change is always a possibility. Queer Questions pose a direct jolt of energy to the social field that 'excites' discourses, practices, and relationships in ways that expose otherwise unquestioned and unquestionable features of the social world to reflection. See Butler's book *Excitable Speech: A politics of the performative* for a detailed account of the concept of 'excitability' (1997).

they view as the primarily heterosexual cis male lens through which Islamic discourse has been interpreted. Additionally, since LQM was meant to provide a space for religious and practising queer Muslims, not only was the 'queering' happening at the discursive level of textual hermeneutics but also at the level of praxis through communal rituals, like *ṣalāh* and *dhikr*.

4.3.2. Progressive Muslim Mysticism: The Mevlevi Order in London

At the beginning of my fieldwork with the IMI, I attended one of the 'Raise Your Gaze' conferences in September 2017 on the topic of Islamic feminism. The event was held at St. Ethelburga's Church in Central London and was well-attended, due to the draw of the keynote speaker—Amina Wadud. As part of this event, Maria who is one of the two founders of the IMI, led a workshop on 'queer Muslims and Islam'. She described how the IMI was set up to fulfil the need for a space that was queer affirming but also focused on *practising* Islam. She stressed the *practising* part as she elaborated that this was an unfulfilled niche since other Progressive Muslim organisations in London that were queer inclusive were either secular in their orientation, or focused on meeting other needs, e.g., social, legal, psychological, or activist. She discussed how over the years of her work with queer Muslims in the UK she became acutely aware of how queer Muslims felt the need to practise and express their religiosity but both queer and Muslim spaces left them feeling they had to choose to repress some aspects of their selves to express other aspects.

This is when Asma, a straight Muslim woman ally, shared how she was part of a Sufi group in London, The Threshold Society, where the addition of an intersex person had led to the questioning of, and a shift in, how performances (worship, sermons, events, spiritual exercises etc.) were practised. I was intrigued by this and asked her if I could attend this Sufi

group as part of my anthropological fieldwork and meet this queer person she had spoken about. She said she would discuss it with everyone and let me know. A few days later she got in touch with me and welcomed me to join the next gathering of the Sufi group. To participate in the group, new members had to be interviewed and were initially given permission to join on a trial basis. Hence, I was given information and instructions about the group, its philosophy, history, etiquette, and rules and I had a brief interview with one man from the group before I attended the first gathering.

This was a Mevlevi Sufi group that met every Friday evening in Central London for a *sohbet,* a spiritual gathering, where participants perform the rituals of the transnational Mevlevi Sufi Order (*tarīqah*). This Mevlevi Order traces its lineage directly back to Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273), a figure that looms large in the history of Islamic philosophy, poetry, and *sufism*. In 1990, Kabir Helminski was bestowed the title of 'Mevlevi Shaikh' from the previous head of the Mevelvi Order, and he claims to be part of an unbroken chain of Mevelvi Shaikhs. The Mevlevi Order practices Islam as a trans-religious mystical phenomenon based on experiential, somatic, and relational knowledge of Allah to complement the knowledge from textual sources. It is welcoming of all people regardless of their religious faith or lack of it, and contemporary practitioners emphasise that the practices and philosophy of the Mevlevi Order must be applied to promote individual as well as social healing and justice in today's world (Helminski 2017).

The gatherings included rituals like chanting the Divine names of Allah (*dhikr*), ecstatic whirling in a state of spiritual connection with the Divine (*sema* or *samāʿ*), meditation, studying and discussing the Qur'ān and the works of Mevlana Rumi, as well cultivating spiritual courtesy, respect, and etiquette (*adab*). New participants were instructed

about the *adab* and intentionality required when entering the sacred space where the ritual would occur. In fact, the sacred space could be any place, which could be transformed into a sacred one through the participants' intentional practice of the affective states, dispositions, enactments, and norms of *adab*. The group was usually around 15-20 individuals with most being regulars to the group. The ritual ceremonies were held in a large room on the first floor of a church in Central London.

For a *dhikr* ceremony the participants would arrange themselves in a mixed gender circle and the ritual leader, who could be female or male, 'opened' the space with *Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah*[47] and an invocation to Allah (*duʾa*). The space around the circle formed by the participants was considered sacred and everyone had to enter it with a hand on their heart and by forming the right intention (*niyyah*). The ritual of *dhikr* followed a pre-determined sequence and there were rules about body movements as well as the volume, speed, and tone of the chanting that determined the correct ritual performance that everyone was expected to respect and follow accurately. The *dhikr* always began with a silent meditation with instructions to mentally recite the names and attributes of Allah[48] until the ritual master—could be male or female—indicated it was time to switch to chanting them audibly. Everyone was expected to chant in unison as a group following the lead of the ritual leader. This part of the ritual often led to the most energetic and effervescent energy in the room as participants moved their bodies in a steady, coordinated, and rhythmic movement. There was space in the centre of the group where a person could stand up and whirl if they felt over-taken by

[47] This is the first chapter (*Sūrah*) of the Qur'ān. It is also referred to as 'The Opener' and is embedded in various aspects of Islamic practice. For instance, it is recited during *ṣalāh*, used to mark the beginning of social functions, and believed to help with healing diseases and suffering of various kinds.
[48] *Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā* or 'Allah's Beautiful Names' are the 99 names used to refer to Allah in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

'Divine ecstasy' (*ḥāl*), although, I never witnessed anyone do that when I attended these meetings. After the *dhikr* portion of the ritual, the members passed around a pre-selected reading and then offered their respective reflections on the passages. The readings were usually the works of Mevlana Rumi or other related short spiritual readings or poetry.

Finally, the group would assemble to offer the *'Ishā'* (night) prayers together. The prayers were often led by one of the female ritual leaders and congregants would arrange themselves in straight rows (*saf*) with a gap in the middle with men on the right and women on the left side of the rows. The ritual leaders explained to the group that the Mevlevi Order affirms the equal dignity and spiritual standing of all people, and hence, not only could women lead as *imāms*, but the spatial arrangement of the congregation also reflected gender equality. Hence, the spatiality of gender in this group was unusual in the sense that it deviated both from that of traditional Muslim places of worship and the IMI. Unlike the former, women did not stand behind men but, unlike the latter, they were on the left side of the rows. Thus, they were equal while, in conformity with considerations of modesty, also separated.

The ritual leaders in this group had commented a few times that this practice of a female *imām* leading from the front and the side-by-side (but not mixed) spatial arrangement of the men and women in the congregation during prayers was considered 'heretical' by some Muslim leaders and communities but that this can be interpreted as 'a good sign' instead of a weakness. For instance, one of the ritual leaders referred to an often-quoted *ḥadīth* that there will be 73 different sects within Islam and only one will be 'correct'.[49] In

[49] See Roy Mottahedeh's analysis of how different Islamic scholars have historically interpreted this *ḥadīth* in varying ways within their socio-political context; and the diversity in the sources and content of the Prophetic Traditions that address Islamic sects and the salvific significance of sectarianism (2010).

this case, she stressed that this *ḥadīth* does not mean that only the Mevlevi community will be saved, but to emphasise that not only is it expected that there will be a diversity within Muslims but also, paradoxically, all sects will be saved if the one sect that is 'correct' is the one which advocates the validity and virtue of plurality in practices and beliefs as long as they do not violate the 'core purpose' of Islam: promote a social order that establishes justice and wellbeing for all. Regardless, theoretically this still could mean that all other sects could be violating the core purpose as both the beliefs on what is the core purpose of Islam as well as what constitutes a violation of it were from the Mevlevi tradition.

The Mevlevi Order describes their approach to the practise of Islam as a holistic approach to the Sacred (Helminski 2017). The focus is on complementing the intellectual knowledge that comes from textual hermeneutics of Islamic sources with an embodied knowledge that emerges from practising specific spiritual rituals. The participants of the group described achieving states of consciousness that I consider quite like the concept of 'peak experiences'[50]. Through daily embodied spiritual practices done alone, as well in the midst of the Sufi community, some participants described they felt a sense of 'non-dual Oneness' or an experiential sense of *Tawhid*: the Unity, Oneness, and Immanence of Allah within everything and everyone. These experiences were also accompanied with feelings of

[50] In the psychological literature, 'peak experiences' emerge from Abraham Maslow's term for conscious experiences of intense joy and fulfilment (Maslow 1999). Related concepts include 'peak performance,' which involves a clear focus, high level of performance, and a strong sense of self. While ecstasy and states of flow are experiences of being so thoroughly absorbed in an activity or experience that there is a loss a sense of self and the accompanying sense of time and space. Flow states can also involve peak performance and are marked by a phenomenological experience of intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, exploration, and a feeling of ease. The construct of 'peak experiences' in transpersonal psychology has been studied in relation to people's phenomenological experiences of 'mystical' or 'spiritual' experiences, which include a sense of the dissolution of the self, spaciousness, connectedness with other people, beings, cosmos, or some sense of a 'sacred' reality (Privette 1983). Maslow elaborated on the connection between peak experiences and experiences of 'transcendence' where there is both joy and fulfilment together with a sense of dissolution of the self into a larger unified 'field' or cosmos by coining the term 'unitive peak experience' (1993).

expansiveness; sensations and imagery of Light (*nūr*); unity with the cosmos or Divine Reality (*Ḥaqq*); love for Allah; wisdom, and belongingness, annihilation of the self within the Divine (*fanāʾ*). Hence, this can be considered a distinct pathway of accessing knowledge of the Islamic Revelation—the Pre-Text of the Revelation (Ahmed 2016: 363)— where the sources are not text-based but internal, personal, experiential and somatic. It is also called *maʿrifa* or mystical or phenomenological knowledge of the sacred rather than an intellectual understanding of the sacred.

4.3.3 Negotiating the spatiality of gender in rituals

LQM, the Progressive Muslim organisation that I worked with during my fieldwork and which has been mentioned several times, engaged in a very detailed engagement with the Islamic sources to construct religious discourses as well as ritual practices. The founder, of the LQM, Ali Raza, an intersex queer Muslim, from a Bosniak Shī'i family was born with what the doctors called 'ambiguous genitalia'. The doctors advised his parents to consent to their child undergoing a series of 'corrective surgeries'. Ali described these surgeries as 'un-consented body modification and mutilation'. He preferred to use male pronouns and was most comfortable with an appearance and gender performance that would be interpreted as 'male' in most social settings. He felt that other Progressive Muslim organisations in London that are queer inclusive, or even queer-focused, did not meet his needs or accommodate the full diversity within the queer Muslim spectrum.

He had also been active in the IMI and experienced a lack of awareness on the experience of intersex people, and more broadly, trans and genderqueer people in it. For instance, he felt that he was repeatedly being misgendered as 'a cis man' by some people within the IMI even when he had been open that he was intersex and identified as 'agender'.

He felt that given the focus of the IMI on empowering Muslim women in religious spaces there was not enough space for people with other marginalised gender identities. When he tried to take more active roles and initiate events, he felt that there was a reaction from some people at the IMI that discouraged him from taking a more active role because he was perceived as 'a man'. When I discussed this with one of the organisers and trustees at the IMI, she acknowledged that there were mistakes made and that due to Ali bringing them up to them there has been an increased reflection about how to make the IMI more inclusive and steps were taken to empower trans, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex Muslims. Regardless, at the time when I initially met Ali, he felt estranged from other Progressive Muslim organisations, and he gathered other like-minded queer Muslims and started building the foundations for the LQM.

Ali described how he often experienced Progressive Muslim spaces as continuing to exclude queer Muslims, especially those who are not homonormative. He recounted his experience with the Mevlevi group as an example of both the continuing exclusions as well as the potential for inclusive changes within Muslim spaces. He was drawn to this group because his upbringing was within the Bektashi/Alevi sect that his Bosniak parents were part of. He felt that the *sema* ceremony practised by the Mevlevi order was the closest to the type of ritual prayers he was searching for that London had to offer. Furthermore, the culture of the group seemed accepting, well-informed, and progressive to him which made him feel that they would accept his gender identity once he disclosed it to them.

Initially, Ali did not feel safe enough to reveal to the congregation that he was intersex, but over time he felt comfortable enough to 'come out'. Eventually, most regulars knew that Ali was intersex and did not identify as either male or female. During this time he

had been enjoying the *dhikr*, but felt uncomfortable during the prayers and often would not participate in that aspect of the gathering. Instead, he would often sit at the back while everyone else prayed together. He explained that his discomfort came from the gender binary constructed and enforced in the ritual prayer with a clear division between the male and female sides of the prayer space. He explained that during the *dhikr* there was no need to identify one's gender in any way as all members sat together in a circle, and this made that part of the ceremony comfortable for him. But the clear gender-based spatial arrangement during the *namaz* (formal prayers) felt very exclusionary to him. He explained that it felt like a way of rejecting who he was and lying. He commented once that for him prayers are a time when feeling authentic is even more important to him than at other times because he is directly in touch with Allah and communing, communicating, and worshiping 'her' (Ali usually used female or gender-neutral pronouns to refer to Allah).

Ali wanted to be authentic in front of Allah and the congregation and one evening, while everyone was arranging themselves for the prayers, he decided to stand right in the centre of the prayer area between the men's and women's side. This led to some confusion among the congregation as they weren't sure what he was doing, and a few people asked him to stand on the male side. He explained that he did not identify as a man and that he preferred to stand in the centre between the men and the women. One of the women in the congregation felt this was inappropriate and told him that his position was against the 'correct' performance of the ritual prayers, according to the Mevlevi order. Ali had already been feeling anxious and stressed about taking up such a position so publicly and described feeling rejected by the congregation, especially by the woman who questioned his position. His body started to shake, and he felt a mix of intense fear, anger and helplessness and he

announced that he had decided not to pray at all then! Although he would usually not pray in these gatherings anyway the fact that he looked visibly distressed, had made a statement through his choice of placement, and had abruptly announced that he won't be praying anymore with the group, left the congregation shaken.

Thereafter, there were a series of conversations and meetings between Ali and different members of the congregation. The group was very particular about the *adab* of how their rituals were performed while also priding itself for being inclusive and based on the Mevlevi philosophy of love as a Divine virtue. These two aspects of the congregation caused tension in this case as their already gender-equal practices were challenged on the very criteria that were used to justify them. The group leaders felt motivated and impacted enough by this to ask Ali about his life experience and learn what he meant by the term 'intersex'. The most senior member of this congregation reached out to the leader (*Shaykh*) of their Sufi *ṭarīqah* to discuss how to proceed with this situation. Under the guidance of the Shaykh, the London group was allowed to accommodate Ali's gender identity by adjusting the gendered spatial arrangement of the ritual prayer. Ali was finally allowed to stand in the middle space that was originally meant to mark a gap between the male and female sides of the prayer area.

Observing this concrete example of a re-negotiation of an authorised ritual performance for a Muslim group provides an example of the dynamic, often 'bottom-up,' processes involved in constructing and negotiating religious orthodoxy. Applying Asad's (1986) definition of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' geared towards establishing orthodoxy allows us to imagine a long lineage of debates between both expert and 'ordinary' Muslims that constitute *what* Islam looks like at a specific point in time or at a particular place. The

voices in these debates are placed in very different positions of authority, influence, and power; thereby discourses and practices that are 'authorised' are also the ones that can influence, convince, pressure, or coerce most of the community. While rituals are often viewed as fixed and non-agentic, in cases where individuals or groups are moved to deliberate on the assumptions and principles behind the ritual, there is room for a creative re-negotiation of not only the ritual but, potentially, the authorising power structures and relations that legitimise and regulate the ritual.

In this specific case, the religious community and their leadership were open to the challenge posed by Ali to some of the assumptions behind the authorised arrangement of the ritual of the *ṭariqah*, e.g., that the gender of the congregants can be categorised within a binary model or is always self-evident. Hence, Ali was not only incorporated back into the fold of the group but through him there was a broader shift in a fundamental belief and practise concerning gender. But this shift in the gender order was not an easy one for everyone in the community and despite an official authorisation Ali continued to experience instances where other congregants corrected his prayer position or expressed their disagreement with the new ritual spatiality.

Furthermore, the gender binary was expanded with a non-binary category and spatial position but, for Ali, the continued existence of gender as a category to divide the congregation and space during prayers did not feel like full equality and integration. It also meant that while the gender identity of cisgender men and women were signified in the ritual, all other gender identities were equated as the 'Other' of men and women. For him the only true gender equality during prayers would exist when people of *all* (and no) gender could choose where to stand and pray shoulder-to-shoulder.

This sentiment is one that I heard frequently in PM prayer spaces which had mixed gender prayers that had no specific space assigned behind the *imām* based on gender identity. An ethnographic study of North American Progressive Muslim mosques also demonstrates the centrality of not only female *imāms* but the gender integration of congregants during prayers (Thompson 2020a: 881). Hence, the queering of gender identities from a binary model to a spectrum has consequences not only in changing how space is gendered but also the relevance of gender as a social category for certain aspects of ritual.

The experiences at Threshold and the IMI motivated Ali to set-up the LQM because, as he put it, 'Queer Muslims have to actively queer Islam and make it their own instead of expecting other Muslims to be able or willing to do that.' Hence, this is also an example of how the discursive tradition and practices of a specific Muslim group may split and form different communities of interpretation and practices.

4.4. CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the question of female ritual leadership in Islamic worship and described the discourses and practices of Progressive Muslims who have advocated for greater gender egalitarianism in Islamic rituals. I explored the way the focus on gender relates to the forms of leadership and image of the Divine that are common in the IMI. Furthermore, as the concept of gender identity expands from a binary to a spectrum the assumption of having fixed spatiality of gender during ritual becomes increasingly untenable. While an addition of a third row for someone who is intersex led to a change in the gender spatiality of prayers at the Mevlevi group, both the IMI and the LQM have people with a diverse range of gender identities making it difficult for them to both recognise multiple gender identities and assign specific spaces in the ritual for specific gender identities.

Therefore, a change in the conceptualisation of gender identity from a binary to a spectrum results in corresponding changes in the way space is gendered during Islamic rituals. On the one hand, the focus on female ritual leadership makes gender highly visible and salient for the space occupied by the *imām* while, on the other hand, the space occupied by the congregation behind the *imām* becomes gender-neutral to reflect the ethos of inclusion and equality for a diversity of gender identities.

5. Progressive Muslim Engagements with Homonationalism

In this chapter I will explore the debates and experiences of the relation between queerphobia and Islamophobia within the contemporary political context in the UK. To do so I will use case studies of public activism to explore the frequent debates within the IMI and related networks around the question: How is it possible to challenge queerphobic practices and institutions within contexts marked by homonationalist discursive structures? The cases I have in view are: the Muslim parents' protests against the 'No Outsiders' educational programme; the proposed, but cancelled, East End London Pride Parade[51]; and the public disagreement with British gay rights activist Peter Tatchell (Douglas et al. 2011; Kuntsman & Miyake 2008a). These debates tend to focus on the question of how queer rights and empowerment can be approached within the context of prevalent Islamophobic prejudices and practices.

[51] In March 2011, plans for a 'gay pride' march in East London, which was being planned in response to the appearance of stickers in public areas that claimed the area to be a 'gay-free zone' with an accompanying violent threats and Qur'ānic verses, were cancelled when it was revealed that some of the organizers of the 'pride march' had links with the English Defence League and other anti-Muslim groups (Decolonize Queer 2011; Zanghellini 2012a).

5.1. THE TEACHING ROW AND THE 'NO OUTSIDERS' PROGRAMME

During one evening in the month of May in 2019, IMI organised a conference call with board members, volunteers, and members of the congregation to discuss how to address the 'LGBTQ+ Teaching Row'. "We do not want to feed into the agenda of demonising Muslim communities that is occurring in the media due to this situation, but can we also afford to stay silent when so many from our congregation are feeling so much pain due to this?" This was the question that one of the board members of the IMI asked in the thick of the national mediatised public discussion on the protests by Muslim parents outside two schools in Birmingham against the 'No Outsiders' programme.

The programme was developed by Andrew Moffat, an assistant head teacher at Parkfield Community School which was one of the two schools that were the main sites of the protests. The 'No Outsiders' programme was developed by Moffat, who identifies as a gay man, to bring discussions of inclusion and diversity within primary school curricula. The programme is not a part of any sex education curricula and does not focus only on sexual orientation and gender identity but is meant to include all the social categories designated as 'protected characteristics' by the 2010 Equality Act, including religion, race, age, sex, disability, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage and/or civil partnership status.

Although the programme attracted limited criticism from parents initially, the situation changed in February 2019 when some parents, together with other groups against the programme, started protesting daily outside the school demanding the suspension of this programme on the grounds that LGBT issues should not be taught to children. These protests led to a temporary halt in the teaching of this programme, but it was restarted in September 2019 after consultations with parents. In October 2019 the controversy ended up in the courts

which resulted in the creation of a permanent ‘exclusion zone’ around the school site where the protests were banned due to their impact on the school’s ability to function and some of the lead organisers of the protests were also issued fines (Parveen 2019). The protests attracted intense media coverage and public discussions in the UK where the issue of queerphobia among the protestors was often highlighted, particularly the more inflammatory signs, chants, and comments.

During the IMI conference call many participants shared their personal distress due to different aspects of their own identities feeling attacked and pitted against each other in the public discourse around these protests. The discussion focused on the question of what, if anything, the IMI should do in response to this situation. While some participants felt that the IMI should make a public statement condemning the queerphobia demonstrated by some of the protestors and making it clear that Islam and LGBTQIA+ equality are not in contradiction, others felt that this would still feed into a problematic narrative of Muslim homophobia vs. ‘British values’. After a long discussion where different perspectives and opinions were expressed, there was a conclusion that IMI will seek to issue a public statement in collaboration with other like-minded organisations and activists which will support LGBTQIA+ inclusive education but highlight how this programme has been rolled out in a divisive manner that racialises the issue of queerphobia and links it to ‘de-radicalisation’ and surveillance of Muslim students.

This discussion at the IMI highlights how the organisation functions not just as a mosque that provides a space for congregants to come together and pray, but also as a hub for advocacy and activism for Progressive or Inclusive Muslims. The board, employees, volunteers, and congregants at the IMI are involved in a network of community

organisations, support groups, activist and academic circles that are engaged with events and debates around social justice, specifically issues related to British Muslims. This chapter will explore the different approaches at IMI to the debates and issues around queer (LGBTQIA+) Muslims in the UK.

The IMI is often approached by the media to comment whenever there are any news stories related to Muslims—especially issues that involve Muslim women and Muslim LGBTQIA+ issues—but they seldom engage with the media unless they can get some assurance that the issue will be framed according to their preferences and values. Additionally, the funding agencies often elicit responses and commitments related to the advocacy of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights within Muslim communities. Within this context, the IMI has pursued an approach that focuses on challenging the way these issues are often represented in media and policy discourses. Specifically, the IMI aims to challenge discourses around gender and sexuality that employ narratives with a threatening racialised Muslim 'Other'. The activism, media statements, and trainings at IMI seek to address issues of sexism and queerphobia without simultaneously employing the trope of 'good Muslims' who are integrated in the British mainstream and 'bad Muslims' who refuse to integrate by continuing to have different lifestyles from the majority (Mamdani 2002). The assumption in the good vs. bad Muslim discourse is that the Muslims who appear the least distinct from the British mainstream are the most accepting of gender and LGBTQIA+ equality and rights while visible religiosity and difference from the mainstream is a sign of radicalisation and hostility towards the welfare and dignity of women and queer people. These discourses highlight the racialised religious aspect of this proposed correlation but do not highlight economic and political marginalisation.

While the IMI may seem critical of mainstream activism, discussions, and policies under the umbrella of 'Muslim patriarchy and homophobia,' this critique emerges from their position that in the British context these issues are primarily couched within racist and Islamophobic discourses. Instead, the ethos of activism that people at the IMI have formulated seeks to focus on challenging prejudices and injustices perpetuated by dominant groups, which looks different when addressing the non-Muslim British community compared to when addressing the dominant groups *within* the minority British Muslim community. While the former involves activism and public critique of Islamophobic discourses that are prevalent in the British state and society, the latter is done through creating and promoting alternative inclusive Islamic spaces, communities, and discourses in non-confrontational ways. This chapter will explore the external public activism around issues related to queer rights while the next chapter will explore IMI's work on these issues that addresses other Muslims and is carried on in a more private manner.

5.2. HOMONATIONALISM

One of the key concepts that is employed in activism and discussions at the IMI around LGBTQIA+ issues and British Muslims is 'homonationalism'. Homonationalism is a term introduced by the critical anthropologist and 'queer of colour' academic-activist, Jasbir Puar, to describe the type of emerging nationalisms, primarily in North America, Europe, Israel, and Australia, that are relatively more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ citizens while simultaneously linking that inclusion to processes of exclusion of racialised communities, especially Muslim communities (Puar 2017). The exclusion of populations racialised as Muslim is based on an image of a homogenised threatening 'Other' that will harm the safety and rights of LGBTQIA+ citizens, i.e., it re-imagines homophobia as primarily a racialised issue.

Homonationalism describes how LGBTQIA+ rights and identities are instrumentalized to buttress narratives of the 'clash of civilisations'. It focuses on the need to contain threats to the newly emergent self-image of a 'queer-friendly' nation from Muslim 'Others' both inside and outside national borders. The recent changes in public attitudes around LGBTQIA+ issues and legal recognitions and protections afforded to the LGBTQIA+ communities in the UK[52] have also given rise to a new iteration of Islamophobic discourses where the Muslim 'Other' is not just a threat in terms of their usual regressive approach to women, other faith traditions, and secularism but are now *also* a threat to the safety, inclusion, and rights of LGBTQIA+ communities (Puar 2017).

When it came to public debates and controversies around LGBTQIA+ issues in relation to Muslim communities, the IMI usually aimed to shift the focus away from Muslim homophobia or on internal conflicts between the 'good' Progressive Muslims and the 'bad' mainstream Muslims and towards the issues of increasing state surveillance, policing of working-class Muslim youth, Prevent policy, disproportional incarceration rates of British Muslims, and the broader socio-economic inequalities. They aimed to highlight how these broader processes of socio-economic marginalisation, stigmatisation, and securitisation of Muslim communities are directly linked to the issues that are being foregrounded related to violence, inequalities, and prejudices related to gender and sexual orientation within Muslim

[52] Sexual contact between two consenting adults of the same sex over the age of twenty-one was decriminalised in England and Wales by the Sexual Offences Act 1967, while it was decriminalised in 1980 in Scotland and 1982 in Northern Ireland. The age of consent for same-sex relations was equalised with heterosexual relations in 2000. Openly gay and bisexual people were not allowed to serve in the armed forces until 2000. The right to adopt was given to same-sex couples in 2002. The ban on 'promoting homosexuality in schools' (Section 28) was overturned in 2003. Marriage equality became legal in England, Wales, and Scotland in 2014. While public opinion surveys show that a majority of the public took the view that 'homosexuality is always wrong' in the 1980s in the UK which changed to a minority opinion by the 2000s (Park & Rhead 2013).

communities. These processes are best understood with the help of some analytical constructs which follow.

5.2.1. Queerness/Raciality

I have defined the term 'Queer' in the context of gender in chapter 4 while the concept of 'raciality' in chapter 1 as part of the experience of being Muslim in the U.K. Here I will take up both concepts again to understand the subjectivities of queer Muslims and, more broadly, Progressive Muslim subjectivities and discourses. To gain deeper understanding of both concepts an intersectional lens is required that places various strands of identities, social categories, and power dynamics together in the same analytical framework.

The term 'intersectionality' is credited to the Black critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first used the term in a 1989 article to highlight the consequences of single-axis frameworks that treat 'race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' (1989: 139). As part of the broader discourse and activism, sometimes referred to as 'third-wave feminism,' intersectionality highlights how the very nature of having multiple identities creates experiences and subjectivities that are irreducible to the single identities that make them up. Crenshaw criticised the focus of feminist and anti-racism theories, laws, and activism on the 'singular disadvantages' of sexism or racism because the experiences of those who exist on the intersections of different disadvantages are excluded by this kind of perspective. She gives examples of employment discrimination cases brought by Black women that were dismissed by courts due to evidence that the employers did not discriminate in the basis of sex or race as they hired White women and Black men: 'This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened

and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination' (1989: 140).

Queer is also employed to make a distinction from the type of 'gay', and more broadly LGBT, politics and subjectivities present in certain mainstream rights-seeking projects that seek to gain inclusion in ways that end up bolstering heteronormative norms and neo-liberal logics that exclude and oppress *other* queer people and populations (not just in sexual and gender contexts but also those deemed 'queer' due to their racial, class, disability, or other aspects of their self). Lisa Duggan, cultural studies theorist, introduced the term 'homonormative' to describe a kind of neoliberal LGBTQIA+ politics of inclusion, and their associated subject-formations, which seek equality in heteronormative social relations and institutions for certain sections of sexual and gender minorities that have privileges and positionalities that poise them for such limited inclusions. Although the inclusion of a segment of queer people in mainstream institutions and culture is perceived as empowering for that part of the queer community, this type of inclusion still maintains, or even strengthens, the socio-economic inequalities and exclusionary and stigmatising gender and sexual norms that harm large segments of the queer community due to a privatization of affective as well as economic and public life (Duggan 2003: 66).

The 'right kind of queers' are invited to shape themselves in ways that replicate and conform to the same heteronormative ideals of neoliberal domesticity and consumption that continue to exclude most queer people who do not have class, race, looks/able-bodied privileges (Sabsay 2012). This shows up in the continued denigration of relationships and sexual practices that do not conform to the ideal of a traditional monogamous nuclear family

model or continues to exclude gender identities and expressions that do not match normative gender norms.

Hence, queer politics is defined in this context as a more non-assimilationist and critical approach to the issues that dominate mainstream gay politics, e.g., related to marriage equality, inclusion in the military establishment, and policing of anti-queer hate crimes (Chavez et al. 2016). Importantly, Duggan's concept of homonormativity is primarily focused on a neoliberal sexual politics that promotes wealth inequalities, privatization of public goods, and the sovereignty of markets and corporate interests and not necessarily an evaluation of gay people's relative assimilationism or transgression of norms although the latter can be linked to the former.

Queer can also be understood as a type of counterculture, or an alternative subculture, that defines itself as more transgressive in its aesthetics and lifestyle practices compared to mainstream LGBT communities. Queer as a term is also employed in queer theory as 'an approach,' rather than an identity, that questions the very notion of 'identity' itself, which can offer important critiques of the limits and contradictions of identities (Butler 2011; Jagose 1996; Sedgwick 2008). Nevertheless, this approach still requires more clarity around what a 'non-identitarian' approach actually entails (Puar 2017: 206).

Furthermore, the critique of identities can also lead to a depoliticised perspective where the discourses and practices of identity are assumed to no longer have material impacts on people's experiences and opportunities just because the queer subject is now operating in a 'colour-blind' and post-identity world. This can lead to a stance where questions of social oppression and inequalities are viewed as superficial 'identity politics' of

the ‘old gay’ paradigm, hence, something that queer people with race and/or class privilege no longer need to be concerned about (Puar 2017: 23).

Puar highlights how the central ethos defining queerness as a concept and identity is not necessarily sexual or gender non-conformity but a generalised resistance, and even transcendence, of social norms. She notes how this concept can lead to ‘an impossible transcendent subject who is already conscious of the normativising forces of power and always ready to subvert, resist, or transgress them’ (Puar 2008: 41). She views the concept of queerness as an analytical tool, a normativising ideal, and an identificatory label for groups of people, which also enacts its own forms of disciplining and control—as is inevitable for any human project. This is a reminder that resistance to the injustices of a hegemonic discourse still remains in conversation with those discourses, practices, and communities. This requires careful reflection and vigilant practice with the goal of not replicating or strengthening the exclusionary or othering discourses and practices. Another Queer of Colour author expresses this sentiment with the following words: ‘The anti-assimilationist streams of current sexual politics are not outside the imperialist project’ (Haritaworn et al. 2008: 89). Overall, Puar advocates the value of cultivating a culture of self-awareness of our inevitable complicities as it ‘signals not the failure of the radical, resistant, or oppositional potential of queerness, but rather can be an enabling acknowledgment’ (Puar 2008: 42).

The political culture at the IMI reflects this theoretical framework as it also highlights intersectionality as well as queerness as an anti-assimilationist and social justice focused practice. Most individuals in the IMI are multiply minoritised and have daily experiences that make them aware of the ways aspects of their identity are related and work in concert rather than in compartmentalised parallel ways. This experiential reality and awareness is reflected

in their theology, religious practice, relationships, and politics as these do not focus on single issues, like queerphobia or Islamophobia, but on the intersections and enmeshments of different identities, experiences, and relationships.

The IMI, as an organisation, is conscious that its positionality of serving people who are multiply minoritised gives it a different focus in terms of its activism and approach to issues than either mainstream LGBTQIA+ organisations and communities, or mainstream (publicly heterosexual-only) British Muslim organisations and communities. Therefore, the lens that works best in understanding the religious practice, discourse, subjectivities, and politics of IMI is one that does not foreground either queerness or raciality and religion but examines them in tandem through the joint concept of 'Queerness/Raciality'. This is also a good place to start examining the nature of the IMI's activism as the organisation itself emerged from the experiences of anti-racist queer activism and theological work of its two co-founders: Tamsila Tauqir and Dervla Shannahan.

5.3. PETER TATCHELL: DEBATE ON QUEERNESS/RACIALITY

One of the most prominent 'gay rights' organisation within the British context is Peter Tatchell's organisation OutRage! that often addresses issues related to queer Muslims. Some of his statements and actions alluded to below, though ostensibly supportive of LGBT rights, used language which some of his Muslim critics felt could feed into the prevailing Islamophobic discourses in the U.K. One of them was Tamsila Tauqir, one of the co-founders of the IMI, who was also one of the co-founders of the Safra Project, an organisation that was set up in October 2001 and was active till 2005 by and for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women who identify as Muslim religiously and/or culturally

(Decolonizing Sexualities Network n.d.). Thus the IMI includes individuals and organisations that were also allied and active with the Safra project.

The word Safra is related to the words for ‘journey’ and ‘discovery’ in Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi (Persian) and was set up to address the specific issues and needs that emerge from the intersections of religion, gender, sexuality, and race within the context of a post-9/11 world order. The organisation worked specifically in the context of the UK and operated in a civil society space dominated by queer organisations and British Muslim organisations that often worked on single-issue politics that left queer Muslim voices and needs unaddressed and unacknowledged, particularly of queer Muslim women.

The experience of activists within the Safra Project led them to view the discursive style of mainstream LGBTQ+ organisations—especially in contexts like Western Europe, North America, Israel, and Australia—as deliberately or unwittingly colluding with Orientalist constructions of Muslim sexuality that are used for justifying the ‘War on Terror’. To elaborate these problematic complicities of the language of activism used within mainstream Western LGBTQIA+ circles with the securitisation of minority Muslim communities in the West, Tamsila together with trans academic of colour Jin Haritaworn, and Turkish-German migrant feminist scholar Esra Erdem published an article entitled: ‘Gay imperialism: Gender and sexuality discourse in the “War on Terror’” in the edited volume *Out of Place: Interrogating silences in Queerness/Raciality* (Kuntsman & Miyake 2008a).

The book editors, Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake, introduced the volume as emerging from the feeling of being ‘out of place’ in an academic conference hosted by a British university on the Anglo-American constructions of ‘Queer’(2008b: 5). Since they both identify as queer and not fully ‘at home’ with any one racial or ethnic category, they felt

keenly aware of the intersection and enmeshment of gender, sexuality, and race in ways that their academic and social environments did not seem to recognise yet. They claimed that queer theory in general, as demonstrated in the conference they attended, submerges raciality within queerness in ways that result in racialised groups feeling, or being, silenced. Hence, the book emerged with the aim to treat raciality and queerness as social processes that cannot be separated from each other, or placed in an arrangement where one is more central than the other and, hence, to not only highlight what happens at their intersections but also how 'this intersection weaves in and animates other aspects of life' (Kuntsman & Miyake 2008b: 6).

5.3.1 Critique and Responses

The critique launched by Haritaworn, Tamsila, and Erdem in the article on 'gay imperialism' in the language of Peter Tatchell's activism focuses specifically on the context of Britain and Germany in the post 9/11 context (2008). According to them, just like queer theory submerging raciality within queerness, mainstream queer activism represented by the figure of white gay activist, Peter Tatchell, engages in a single-issue politics of representation where 'gay' implies white and 'ethnic minority' implies heterosexual and homophobic. The authors of this chapter critique this type of gay rights discourse as one that participates in a broader discourse where the questions of women's equality and LGBTQIA+ rights have been instrumentalised as central justifications for not only the global 'War on Terror' but also for national and local demonisation, surveillance, and incarceration of Muslims (Bhattacharyya 2008).

One of the events they refer to in the chapter is Peter Tatchell's statement against the invitation of the then head of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), Sir Iqbal Sacranie, to a Unite Against Fascism (UAF) conference organised by multiple trade unions across the UK in 2006. In Peter Tatchell's website he stated his opposition to this invitation because Sir Iqbal had actively campaigned to maintain homophobic laws, like Section 28, and had recently publicly denounced lesbians and gay men as immoral, harmful, and spreaders of diseases. Furthermore, Tatchell pointed to statements in the MCB website that demonise same-sex relationships as 'offensive', 'immoral', and 'repugnant'. Then, Tatchell goes on to state that such language was 'barely distinguishable' from the rhetoric of the 'neo-Nazi BNP' and that the UAF would not give a platform to anyone who makes similar statements about black or Jewish people and, hence, this invitation is a 'sad betrayal of liberal, non-homophobic Muslims' (Tatchell 2006).

Haritaworn, Tamsila, and Erdem state that the comparison of the MCB, the biggest Muslim organisation in the UK, with the BNP 'equates the subjects and objects of racism' and the accusations of differential treatment of black and Jewish people compared to LGBTQIA+ people 'serve to construct them as non-overlapping groups who are in competition with each other' (2008: 81). They describe the perspectives and experiences of some queer Muslim activists in the UK who have found Tatchell's style and discourse of activism as having 'worsened the situation for the majority of queer Muslims' (2008: 82). They view Tatchell's discourse contesting sexual oppression in Muslim communities as counterproductive and divisive as it constructs the issue as a gay vs. Muslim conflict. Activists at the Safra project claimed that its approach to the issue of empowering queer Muslim women by engaging Muslim communities as allies of queer Muslims against the

shared challenges of imperialism, classism, racism, and Islamophobia was actively thwarted by Tatchell. They stated that Tatchell's approach did not factor in the broader power dynamics of the 'War on Terror' and local and national Islamophobic laws, surveillance, incarceration, and public attitudes. Therefore, they claimed that when Tatchell supports gay rights within Muslim communities through an attack on the broader Muslim community and mainstream Muslim organisations, he channels the power and appeal of a broader global Islamophobic discourse.

Furthermore, they claim that Tatchell prefers to speak on behalf of queer Muslims as their 'saviour' rather than empowering their voices. They further alleged that he prefers to construct queer Muslims in limited roles—the victim or the exceptional person who transcends their repressive culture—that end up confirming the view that Islam is an exceptionally threatening religion to the 'West'. The language of freedoms, human rights, democracy, women's rights, and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people are racialised in this discourse where these values and practices become the exclusive possessions of the West, which must be defended from internal and external Muslim 'Others'. They concluded that 'white gay activists such as Tatchell have proved indifferent to the fact that the mud they sling onto Muslim communities land on queer Muslims themselves' (Haritaworn et al. 2008: 83).

On September 7, 2009, the publisher of this edited volume, Raw Nerve Books, issued a public apology to Peter Tatchell and his organisation OutRage. The publisher declared the collection as 'out of print', on their website and issued a 'statement of apology and correction' that denounced the 'gay imperialism' article as containing 'untruths,' and proclaimed Tatchell as not racist or Islamophobic. The statement clarified that 'Mr Tatchell

has never “employed tactics of intimidation and aggressive divide and rule”, nor has he “attempted to discredit those who resist his patronage”. He does not “sling mud onto Muslim communities”.’(Raw Nerve Books 2009).

This led to a debate on whether this was an act of censorship or a legitimate defense against slanderous statements. Several blog posts, newspaper articles, and magazine pieces were written about it as well as activist roundtables and academic journal articles (Erel & Klesse 2009; Rothe 2009; xtalkproject 2009). While postcolonial and transnational interventions into feminist debates have found a wider audience, writing on how queer politics can also be included in racialised nationalistic domestic and international policies is still a new and precarious line of critique. The decision of the publishers not to publish a second edition was viewed in some activist and academic circles as a de-facto act of censorship, which further marginalises already precarious perspectives (Erel & Klesse 2009: 6). This episode invigorated academic work and transnational activism on the concept of ‘homonationalism’. The fact that queer rights activism happens in specific racialised contexts requires awareness of how Queerness/Raciality work together. The championing of the rights of queer Muslims by white non-Muslim gay activists in ways that do not show awareness and sensitivity to racial power dynamics in their contexts can work in ways that endanger rather than protect queer Muslims. The debate on these issues led the co-founders of the IMI to set up the organisation as a space where Queerness/Raciality were central aspects of not only activism but also personal projects of ethical and religious self-cultivation and community formation.

5.4. HOMONATIONALISM AND PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM ACTIVISM

Homonationalist discursive structures operate with the assumption that the queer community is White and non-Muslim while the Muslim community is heterosexual with conservative family gender and sexual norms. Hence, the experiences of queer Muslims can often be erased within such discursive structures or are instrumentalised to serve agendas that claim to exist for their benefit and welfare but often function in ways that require the subjugation, erasure, and oppression of parts of their identities and relationships that they value, like their religion and ethnic traditions.

The language of combating homophobia and protecting queer people is employed in certain contexts in ways that result in increased exclusion of racialised minorities, especially those from Muslim and working-class communities. For instance, in the context of the politics and discourses that the IMI engages in, there is a perception that LGBTQIA+ inclusive educational initiatives like the 'No Outsiders' programme frames itself in ways that strengthen processes of securitisation and surveillance of Muslims. The 'No Outsiders' programme, which has been mentioned above, was one of the cases which excited much comment. The IMI together with other organisations and individuals that are engaged in LGBTQIA+ inclusion and advocacy released an open letter on September 5, 2019 entitled 'The government is hijacking LGBT+ sex education to bolster its counterterrorism strategy—it must stop now' (Inclusive Mosque Initiative et al. 2019). The letter addressed the signatories' concern over the way that Muslim communities were being framed in media, governmental, and popular discourses in relation to the teaching of LGBT+ inclusive Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) in primary schools in England. In the letter they claim that the No Outsiders programme is tied to the Prevent strategy, which places excessive

scrutiny and surveillance on Muslim children. They also disagreed with its language of teaching 'Fundamental British Values' as they contend that this term is hypocritical as well as divisive and patronising because homophobia is amply demonstrated in British history and contemporary practices and it implies accepting values which are not shared by non-British people or even British people who are Muslim. The letter made it clear that the signatories were not against LGBT+ inclusive educational curricula in primary schools but instead they are critical of how it was currently being framed and instrumentalised: 'As LGBT+ people, we condemn the cynical use of our identities as a form of dog-whistle racism, which is being mobilised to justify harmful policies of state surveillance and the criminalisation of Muslim communities' (2019: 7). They called for the abolishing of the Prevent policy and for LGBT+ inclusive RSE to be delivered within the context of the usual RSE curricula and not under the stigmatising language of the promotion of 'Fundamental British Values'.

This oppositional politics inherent in the discursive formation identified as homonationalism is particularly challenging for British queer Muslims as it can create additional pressures of navigating discourses and policies that seem to tie aspects of self-empowerment in one domain of their identity and experience as necessarily opposed and detrimental to the empowerment of other aspects, relationships, and identities. There is a perception within the IMI that the British state deliberately places programmes for tackling hate and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people within the realm of its counter-radicalisation programmes. There is evidence to show that the creator of the 'No Outsider' programme, Andrew Moffatt, viewed the programme in the racialised terms of 'counter-radicalisation' of Muslims and protection of the nation from the Muslim internal 'Other' (Khan 2021: 140).

Hence, the activism and public position of the IMI to programmes like the 'No Outsiders' educational curricula is to focus on the ways the implementation of diversity and equality education is couched in discourses that end up further stigmatising racialised Muslim populations by creating a sense that Muslims are particularly threatening to the empowerment of LGBTQ+ (presumed to be non-Muslim) citizens. Therefore, to prevent feeding Islamophobic narratives, there is a resistance in IMI's public stance of focusing on those aspects of the protests over LGBT+ inclusive education that are related to discomfort with the idea of teaching children about gender and sexual orientation diversity due to homonegative cultural and/or religious beliefs.

This positionality of British queer Muslims also offers different options to queer Muslims themselves when it comes to engaging in activism. When religion and gender/sexuality are experienced as antagonistic domains some British queer Muslim activists respond with strategies that accept that the antagonism is essential and advocate acceptance or rejection of one or the other domain. On the other hand, other activists approach antagonisms between religious discourses, practices, and institutions with queer and gender rights as either not existing, exaggerated, or capable of transcendence through promotion of synergistic models of religion, gender, and sexuality. These different approaches to activism are tied to how individuals conceptualise their own life experiences and the way they form their subject position, i.e., the modes of political activism are linked to the modes of subjectivation. What makes the internal disagreements about the politics of queer and/or Muslim liberation within Progressive Muslim contexts more complicated and highly emotionally charged is that opposition and disagreement in views and approaches can be framed in terms of 'complicity' and 'co-option', i.e., unconsciously, or cynically

exploiting prejudices to achieve power, fame, and resources to the detriment of other people. Often queer Muslim activists are very self-conscious about such perceptions and accusations and explicitly disavow them by making statements about how they are *both* against racist Islamophobia and homophobia.

During the debate around the protests on the 'No Outsiders' programme these different approaches were demonstrated by the internal debates between British queer and Progressive Muslim individuals and organisations. For instance, while some British queer Muslims considered the protests on the 'No Outsiders' programme as primarily emerging from queerphobia in those individuals and communities that were active in the protests, other British queer Muslims considered this line of critique of the protests as a type of 'co-option' within homonationalist discourses. Reflecting this latter perspective Abeera Khan, whose work looks at queer politics and the IMI in the UK, critiqued those British queer Muslims who publicly criticised homophobic sentiments driving the protests: 'The queer Muslim response legitimises muscular liberalism's discourse, allowing the British state to define itself through a celebration of sexual difference even as it weaponises religious difference' (Khan 2021: 143). This critique claims that in the British context co-option of queer Muslims is inevitable in most activism that focuses on queerphobia within Muslim communities *if* there isn't a vigilant recognition of how Islamophobia and homonationalism are correlated with this type of homophobia. Khan singles out the IMI as an organisation that demonstrates this kind of intersectional activism by stating that it 'challenges homophobia without capitulating to the Prevent agenda, and by extension, British homonationalism' (Khan 2021: 144).

There is a nascent academic literature that applies post-structural critical queer theory and postcolonial theory to examine the links between homonationalist discourses, subject-formation, and political activism (Haritaworn 2015). The 'Queer People of Colour' stream within this literature challenges the logic of oppositional politics, which is based on a zero-sum game of rights and protection where identity-based communities are placed in a context that links their empowerment with the disempowerment of others, i.e. 'exclusive inclusions'. This challenge requires an 'unalienated politics' that focuses on intersectionality and how different types of prejudices, exclusions, and violence are linked and interconnected rather than requiring the alienation of religious communities, discourses, and identities from queer ones (Khan 2021: 144).

5.5. EAST END GAY PRIDE (EEGP)

ARISE AND WARN [EMQ 74:2]

gay free zone

AND FEAR ALLAH; VERILY ALLAH

IS SEVERE IN PUNISHMENT [EMQ 59:7]

These were the words written on stickers, which included a line running through a rainbow flag (Pride flag), that started appearing in public areas of the East London borough of Tower Hamlets in February 2011. These stickers occurred in the context of several high-profile homophobic attacks in the neighbourhood, including where one man was left paralysed (Grew 2008), and persistently high racist incidents and hate crimes on people of colour.[53]

[53] In 2007, the police, Crown Prosecution Service, Prison Service (now the National Offender Management Service) and other agencies that make up the criminal justice system agreed a common definition of 'Hate

According to the local LGBTQIA+ group, Rainbow Hamlets, they had received Metropolitan Police's figures for homophobic incidents being reported in Tower Hamlets and these showed that there had been a 33% increase in reported incidents of homophobic abuse or violence in the months between April 2010-March 2011 compared to the same time period the previous year (Gilbert 2011: 18). The context was already tense as The East London Mosque had been in the news for hosting anti-gay preachers over the years and they were again in the news concerning allegations of promoting homophobia (Farsi 2011; Geen 2011a; Gilligan 2011). Furthermore, during this time the English Defence League (EDL)[54] was heightening its public discourse and planning provocative street campaigns in the Tower Hamlets area, under the rhetoric of protesting against 'militant Islam' (Taylor 2010).

A police investigation started to investigate who was behind these homophobic threats posted around the borough, while some locals started covering these stickers with the

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crime': Any notifiable criminal offence committed against a person or property that is motivated by hostility towards someone based on their disability, race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation, whether perceived to be so by the victim or any other person (Home Office 2011a). While a "racist incident" is any reported incident, including any crime but not limited to it, which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person (Home Office 2011a). Although reported 'racist incidents' in the Metropolitan Police area increased from 10, 190 in the 2008/09 reporting period to 10, 541 in the 2009/10 reporting period, they decreased by 11% to 9,405 in the 2010/11 reporting period (Home Office 2011a). While there was also a slight decrease in 'hate crimes' based on race and religion in 2010 in the areas under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police in 2010 compared to the reported figures from 2009, they were still alarming with 8,270 hate crimes were based on race and 667 based on religion in 2010 (ACPO 2009, 2010). Similarly, hate crimes reported during 2010 based on sexual orientation were also high at 1,362 while those based on gender identity were 82 (ACPO 2010). This represented a slight increase in reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the London metropolitan area in 2010 compared to the previous year (ACPO 2009). These numbers are particularly concerning when viewed relative to the size of the target population, given that LGBTQ+ people form a small percentage of society (~5%) and those who are publicly identifiable as such represent an even smaller percentage (Jones 2021; Office for National Statistics 2021; Williams Institute, UCLA 2011).

[54] The English Defence League can be categorised as a movement of the 'populist radical right' that is focused on the core claim that white English people are 'second-class citizens' in the current political system that is allowing an Islamic take-over of the country. They claim not to be racist but critical of Islam as a religion and particularly Islamism as a political ideology. They view their anti-Muslim rhetoric as not racist as they view Muslims as composed of individuals freely choosing to follow an ideology rather than as a racialised community. Their main mode of political activism is through intimidating street demonstrations marked by racist chants and nationalistic flag waving. For an insightful ethnography of the movement see Hilary Pilkington's book *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League* (2016).

words, ‘love’ or ‘Help yourself to love’ (Dangerfield 2011). The Director of the East London Mosque condemned the stickers as did a broad spectrum of local community groups (Geen 2011b). But another response to the stickers and local homophobic attacks, the organisation of a march through the streets of the borough as a demonstration of Gay Pride by a group of six friends planned for 2 April, 2011, quickly became controversial as it became known that some of its organisers were linked to the English Defence League (EDL) (Geen 2011c).

The anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant political convictions of three East End Gay Pride (EEGP) organisers was first revealed by a blogger.[55] Thereafter, Imaan, one of the largest and oldest queer Muslim organisations in the UK, also based in East London, obtained emails that showed one of the EEGP organisers, Raymond Berry, stating that he had been one of the founding members of the EDL and has remained active in organisations like ‘Stop the Islamification of Europe’ (SIOE). Based on the emails, the board at Imaan concluded about the organising committee of the EEGP that in ‘calling for “East End Gay Pride” [the committee] is motivated primarily by their political desires to build groups and alliances founded on their anti-Muslim and anti-Islam bigotry’ (Imaan 2011: 16). Furthermore, they said that ‘it continues to believe that a truly inclusive community-led Pride March would be one of the best responses to these homophobic crimes’ (Imaan 2011: 17).

Other organisations, like Out East and Rainbow Hamlets, also expressed their opposition to the EEGP march but broadened their concern from just the specifics of the political beliefs and intentions of the EEGP organisers to how Pride Marches through under-privileged, racialised communities in general can easily fold into and buttress contemporary

[55] The blog called Labour Latte, http://lattelabour.blogspot.com, is now no longer available online.

articulations of anti-Muslim hostility in Western contexts. For instance, Out East released an open letter in response to these events in which it stated: 'We cannot disconnect this particular event from the more general trend in Western countries to use LGBTQ liberation campaigns and feminism as a way to stigmatise migrants and Islam as a monolithic culture or Muslim people as uncivilised, barbaric terrorists or hateful invaders' (Out East et al. 2011: 7).

The Out East open letter conceptualises homophobia as a type of discourse that animates acts of hate and discrimination against queer people but one whose proper source and authorial responsibility does not lie directly on the individual or community that expresses it but the broader 'political practices and ideologies' which sustain and connect all forms of oppressions. Therefore, the statement addressed Queerness/Raciality as the lens to view the question of gay pride parades rather than gay rights or anti-racism as separate issues: 'We want both homophobia and islamophobia addressed as a collective problem and not feed one against the other, we do not recognise these as distinct categories' (Out East et al. 2011: 6). They also wanted the cancellation of the event based not only on the political affiliations of the organisers and the divisive and racist tenor of the promotion for the event[56], but also due to the premature conclusions they made regarding the stickers being the work of homophobic Muslims when there were still doubts within the local community whether they were instead 'an attempt from far right groups to stigmatise Muslim people' (Brocklebank 2011; Out East et al. 2011: 2).

[56] The organisers called for the event to be 'non-political', thereby banning anti-fascist activists from the march yet their social media accounts seemed to encourage the participation of populist white nationalists (Geen 2011c; Out East et al. 2011). They called for people to march through the area under nationalistic symbols, like pink Union Jacks, and framed the march as a gay vs. Muslim confrontation (Decolonize Queer 2011: 2).

This led to the withdrawal of support from other groups that had initially supported the march, like Pride London, whose chair Paul Birrell, had initially rejected the call to cancel the event by stating that 'the idea that the far right has decided to re-brand itself with a bit of Kylie and some rainbow flags is laughable' (2011: 6). Raymond Berry resigned from the organising committee and the other organisers defended themselves as simply being 'patriotic' and victims of a 'personal vendetta' launched against them by local gay campaigners. The organisers eventually announced that they were cancelling the event (Geen 2011d).

Thereafter, more stickers appeared in the area and eventually an 18-year-old, Mohammed Hasnath, from Tower Hamlets was caught on CCTV footage pasting these stickers. The youth pleaded guilty under section 5 of the Public Order Act and was fined £100 (Brocklebank 2011). Hasnath claimed that he was merely promoting his faith and that he only distributed a few stickers out of many others that were part of a larger campaign (Telegraph 2011). Eventually, a new organising committee was formed by some of the groups that led the charge against EEGP, like Out East and Rainbow Hamlets, and they organised an entirely separate event called 'East London Pride,' which was held on September 24, 2011. Around 500 people attended the event, including the then mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman (Bakare 2011). The mayor expressed solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ residents of Tower Hamlets based on the shared minority status of queer and Muslim people, stating: 'As a British Asian, as a British Muslim, I know what it's like to be part of a minority. But minorities have since the beginning of time been woven into the fabric of this borough – and what makes us special is how we stand together and speak up for one another' (Rahman 2011).

The organising committee chose not to focus on the 'gay-free zone' stickers or march through the E1 area, where the East London Mosque is located, and these choices were a source of disagreement among the organisers as well as some other gay rights campaigners (Geen 2011e; Tatchell 2011). Instead, the pride route went through Hackney and Tower Hamlets and the message was on unifying against various forms of bigotry as demonstrated by the T-shirts some of the marchers were wearing with the statement: No to homophobia; No to Islamophobia (Hill 2011).

5.5.1. The IMI's Approach

On 13th May 2018 the IMI held an event as part of its 'Raise Your Gaze' series at the Free Word Centre in Central London. The event was titled 'Gender Variance and Sexual Diversity in Islam' and one of the speakers Suhraiya Jivraj, an academic specialising in law, sexuality, and race from a critical and decolonial studies approach, elaborated on the collective anti-racist queer of colour activism during the EEGP episode. Jivraj had been working with the Safra Project and co-founded the Decolonise Queer network (later named Decolonising Sexualities Network) and she described the successful cancellation of the march through the work of the queer Muslim activist networks she was part of as well as other local grassroots activists.

She described how the organisers of the EEGP were able to bring Islamophobic racist discourse in the mainstream media, including LGBTQIA+ media, and public discourse more successfully by queering it than it would have been possible if framed entirely in terms of race and religion. Hence, the working-class Muslim communities of the East End of London were constructed as an internal 'invading' enemy against the majority 'native' white population. A phenomenon that has a long historical lineage, but this time with the relatively

new twist of the Muslim communities being the prime locus of homophobia while British mainstream ('white') population as the symbolic liberators and protectors of the LGBTQIA+ communities, who are themselves imagined as being primarily and symbolically a white constituency. This right-wing incorporation of gay rights has only been possible due to the broader changes in public opinions and legal recognitions of LGBTQIA+ people in Western democracies through tireless campaigns by queer activists who were themselves often racialised, working-class, and gender non-conforming.

Jivraj described the rhetoric and imagery used by the organisers of this march as militaristic and white nationalist. For instance, they used language like 'reclaim the East End' and 'march on' the area, while at the same time refusing to work with and involve Queer People of Colour (QPOC) in the area. On the website for the event, they put up gay renditions of war iconography, like using the iconic photograph 'Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima' where US marines are seen planting a Pride flag—rather than the original US flag—on the Japanese Island during World War II. This narrative constructed 'gay rights' as a novel tool in an already well-equipped arsenal used to justify 'reclaiming' a deprived racialised Muslim area.

She pointed to how right-wing movements like the EDL that are primarily geared against racialised Muslim communities have started to have gay wings now and have suddenly incorporated gay rights as part of their values when they have traditionally been opposed to them as they have realised that during a time of changing mainstream views on gender and sexuality, incorporating certain amenable and acceptable enough LGBTQ+ constituencies within their fold empowers their core mobilising narrative and conviction that Muslims are a threat to European 'civilisation'. Hence, the logic of the EEGP followed a

broader narrative focused on ‘Muslim homophobia’ which constructs religion, particularly Islam, and homosexuality as incommensurable. She pointed to the IMI as proof of the reality of religious communities and individuals combating anti-gay rhetoric and embodying religion and sexuality synergistically.

She advocated anti-racism work that remains aware of the way human rights discourses and gay rights in Western European contexts are deployed to target the most vulnerable within racialised and working-class communities. She stated anti-Islamophobia and anti-racism activism must be fluid enough to allow working with people and organisations who do not share queer-accepting views to fight structural racism, classism, and broader Islamophobic discourses in the West. At the same time, she stressed this fluidity and openness to alliances must occur with ‘red-lines’ in place that ensure ‘we’ do not get co-opted in *other* sexist, racist, or homophobic agendas.

She added that homophobia in minority racialised communities was indeed a serious issue but not one that is unique to any specific community. She described how she has experienced verbal abuse in the Finsbury Park Mosque area but confronting homophobia within minority communities that are precisely being deemed worthy of stigma and oppressive policies due to the claim that they have such ‘cultural deficiencies’ requires a strong dose of empathy, and a focus on the broader structural and discursive environment and history that enables violence, hate, and suffering. Hence, addressing homophobia in racialised minority Muslim communities in the context of contemporary Western Europe requires the focus to be firmly on intersectionality and the race-class dynamics always at play in issues of gender and sexuality.

Similarly, she emphasised that anti-racist queer activism was also not about demonising the white constituencies that are drawn to populist White nationalist movements as these movements and narratives prey on people's genuine grievances. She described how when she moved to Kent her movers were men who had sympathy for the UKIP party, and how much she learned from empathically and openly listening to the reasons behind their political sentiments. She stated that the focus of activism should be broader than attacking individuals, instead it should be the racist neoliberal state policies that participates in a global capitalist structure that produces the global and local inequalities that fuel resentment and anger, while at the same time scapegoating racialised 'Others' both at the global and local levels as the cause of the suffering in people's lives.

5.6. WHERE IS HOMONATIONALISM LOCATED?

The East End Gay Pride march highlights some of the salient features of the debates around the racialisation of the language of LGBTQ+ rights, especially when it relates to the intersections and interactions of Muslims and LGBTQIA+ communities. The varying responses to the homophobic stickers and EEGP map out the spectrum of views and approaches on the issue of homophobia and Islamophobia within Progressive queer Muslim organisations. More broadly, there are nuanced, in-depth, and passionate debates within Progressive Muslim organisations in the UK over the best response to homophobia within Muslim communities. What these varying responses and perspectives point to are core differences in the conceptualisation of the nature of LGBTQIA+ rights and queer-affirming discourses in contexts where actual or perceived differences in practices and beliefs around gender and sexuality lend themselves to processes of racialisation, group identification, Othering, and nationalism (Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017).

More specifically, in contexts where certain queer people are included within the boundaries of the hegemonic social structures and discourses (at least in terms of group self-perception, if not in reality), while the 'Other' differs, or is perceived to differ on this matter, then inclusion and rights can be picked up as valuable tools in projects of national boundary-making (Kehl 2020). Once, a value or practice takes on the role of a cultural attribute that is deemed essential to the identity and nature of a cultural group (its core value) then it is no longer possible to have one without the other—the totem and group are fused. Homonationalist discourses view homophobia and sexism as cultural attributes that are essential, and hence *intrinsic* to Islam, while homophobia within the 'Self' (identified as European civilization, one's nation state, modernity, and secularism that map on to racial boundaries) is viewed as *extrinsic*—a social problem that is more about individual attributes, vestiges of the past, or emerging from domestic 'Others' (Ahmed 2011: 126).

This kind of discourse can then be easily instrumentalised within violent Self-Other power dynamics where the Other is irredeemable. This is because 'the call to liberate from an attribute that is deemed essential is arguably a call to assimilate or annihilate' (Ahmed 2011: 125). Hence, in such contexts, discourses and practices of LGBTQIA+ acceptance are not only about the value and content of these discourses and practices for individuals who are within that community (what these values *are*) but they also play a separate role in Self- and group-formation processes as a 'totem'—an emblem for the nation, race (Whiteness), class, or 'civilisation'—that represents what is exceptional about the 'Self' in relation to the 'Other' (what these values 'do' in the Self-Other dynamic). The folding-in of gay rights into broader power dynamics and conflicts of nation, race, class, and even civilization requires an

awareness of the power dynamics involved, how power is distributed, and to what ends is this power used for?

Therefore, the disagreement around the question of whether gay pride marches in inner-city racialised areas are racist or not revolves around the broader differences in the conceptualisation of the genesis, nature, purpose, and consequences of discourses and practices that affirm and empower queer people: Is the affirmation of queer people and their rights a social phenomenon that is the result of changes in a group's overall empathy for queer people and exists primarily for the promotion of queer people's welfare or is it primarily about the larger social group's 'Self-Other' boundaries, identities, and power dynamics, especially those power dynamics that concern maintenance of racial, class, and national inequalities? Or, is it possible to have the former without the latter?

This is a disagreement over the question of *where* the discourses of homonationalism occur. The differences in approaches relate to whether homonationalism is seen as a primary or core discourse that is always present within LGBTQIA+ inclusion and activism in the type of Self-Other context specified above? For Puar not only is the inclusion of privileged (white) queer subjects in the national body linked to exclusionary racial politics but it is contingent upon it. Therefore, those queer bodies that are most vulnerable to being placed in the identity category of 'potential terrorists,' like South Asian queer diasporic subjects, have to publicly disavow 'the perverse queerness attached to Muslim terrorist bodies' as 'a rite of initiation and assimilation into US heteronormative citizenship' (2017: 168). When it comes to the specific case of the East End Gay Parade this broader question becomes: are gay pride marches in neighbourhoods that are known for their racialised minority Muslim communities always racist?

Progressive and queer Muslim individuals and organisations hold the view that adding an intersectional element to Pride Marches that are meant to, either implicitly or explicitly, confront homophobia within racialised Muslim communities does not adequately pre-empt them from buttressing the broader Islamophobic discourses. They claim that they result in an inevitable facilitation of the racially-charged social processes and practices that are tied to those Islamophobic discourses, e.g., gentrification that displaces working class racial communities with people with class and race privilege; increased police harassment like stop-and-search policies; stigmatising media representations; anti-immigrant laws and border policing; or racially-targeted surveillance and counter-radicalisation procedures among other impacts. This is the position that the people at Safra Project took with regard to the EEGP, which they expressed through releasing an open statement where they expressed dismay over the homophobic stickers as well as their opposition to the EEGP (Safra Project Board 2011).

The Safra statement mentioned above was released together with an article by the allied Decolonize Queer (DQ) network titled, 'From Gay Pride to White Pride? Why marching on East London is racist' (Decolonize Queer 2011). DQ was established after a transnational workshop held in Berlin in 2010 by several Queer/Trans People of Colour (QTPOC) and allies involved in anti-racism activism and academic work (Decolonizing Sexualities Network n.d.). The DQ article placed the East End Pride march in the context of 'a globalising Islamophobia script' where the language of gay-rights is key to advance policies that target racialised Muslim communities, including with increased policing, securitisation, surveillance, border control, incarceration, and economic, social, and political marginalisation (2011: 6). The article specifically linked gay-pride marches in several inner-

city migrant neighbourhoods across West Europe, including in Oslo, Berlin and Brussels, as contributing to a 'neoliberal revanchist agenda' that seeks to displace these communities with gentrifiers who are often gay, queer and trans people with race and class privilege (2011: 5). The article concludes with asking the reader to consider how these gay rights mobilisations will impact working-class queer Muslims who need affordable housing in the area and 'whose gender and sexual expressions invite police harassment rather than protection' (2011: 10)?

5.6.1. Homonationalism and Modernity

This specific conception of homonationalism views it as a primary discourse that is active in *all* queer-affirming discourses and activism even if the intention is to challenge it because it forms the structuring terrain upon which all discourses are laid out. For Jasbir Puar, who coined the term homonationalism, the concept is not simply about the instrumentalization of queer bodies by the state or dominant groups, neither is it just about racism and xenophobia within queer communities or the complicity of queer organisations and individuals with imperialism. Instead, it is 'a structuring facet of modernity' and 'the condition of possibility for national and transnational politics' (2008: 230). These global and domestic changes create 'a historical shift in the production of nation-states from the insistence on heteronormativity to the increasing inclusion of homonormativity' (Puar 2017: 231). For such nation states the promotion of human rights, including for queer people, can serve a symbolic identificatory function that refers to what makes the 'Self' essentially different from the Muslim 'Other' as well as provides a justification for why the 'Self' must defend against the 'Other'.

This theoretical approach to homonationalism claims that the (limited and unequal) progress in LGBTQIA+ inclusion and acceptance in certain Western contexts and Israel is best viewed not primarily emerging from concerns about the rights and dignity of queer people but due to socio-political contingencies, especially those that impinge on constructing and maintaining violent racial exclusions and power inequalities with the Muslim 'Other'.

Puar extends Michel Foucault's account of 'biopolitics' by claiming that in contemporary liberal Western democracies, homonationalism functions as a site of 'biopolitics,' a type of regulatory power with the primary objective to 'make live and let die' (Foucault 2008: 241). While Foucault emphasises the biopolitics function of not only managing life but to making it proliferate while ignoring death: 'power no longer recognises death' (2008), Puar focuses more on Foucault's thesis that in biopolitical regimes 'racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State' as it takes it away from the relationship dynamics of war to a biological relationship focused on the promotion of the health and vitality of the human species, which requires the containment and elimination of inferior races or genetics, i.e., appealing to a form of social evolutionism (2008: 256–257).

Following Achille Mbembe's theorisation of 'necropolitics' (2019), rather than the examination of the promotion of life directly, Puar highlights how life, health, security, freedom are all made contingent on letting *others* die (2017: 35). Since, according to this formulation of homonationalism, the genesis and purpose of mainstream acceptance of some queer people is primarily racial, white gays and feminists can achieve inclusion and rights through accepting the racist terms of this inclusion (Haritaworn et al. 2008: 80).

Furthermore, this literature on homonationalism opens critique of not only homonationalism as perpetuated through the articulations and actions of right-wing and

mainstream, or privileged/dominant groups, or through the mechanisms of the state, but also through the ways queer and racialised people, including queer Muslims, can be complicit in them. For instance, the literature offers critique of the limited subject positions that queer Muslims are offered within homonationalist discourses (Haritaworn et al. 2008). These can be classified as the figure of the 'Victim,' who is oppressed by a culture that is intrinsically homophobic and sexist. This 'victim' figure is part of the tripartite human-rights metaphor that Makau Mutua calls the Savages, Victims, Saviors (SVS) complex (2001: 201). The 'Saviour' figure that is discursively placed within Western cultural and racial identity boundaries. Additionally, there are figures of 'The Liberated', or 'The Exception,' who transcends the shackles placed by their culture, but this freedom is discursively imagined as equivalent to the 'Other' assimilating to the norms and identity of the 'Self' (i.e., entering 'modernity' and Western civilisation). Another common trope is that of the 'The Rebel,' or 'The Pioneer,' who not only transcends the bounds of their culture but courageously fights back with their new compatriots.

These subject-positions promise limited acceptance, support, and inclusion in return for queer Muslim identities, experiences, struggles, and achievements being framed within narratives that reinforce rather than subvert the Self-Other boundaries. Puar writes of the dilemma faced by South Asian queer diasporic subjects in the U.S. who are invited by homonationalist discourses 'into queer and homonormative folds of American patriotism to participate in and reproduce narratives of U.S. queer exceptionalism in contradistinction to perverse (Orientalist) *and* repressed (neo-Orientalist human rights discourse) sexualities of the East' (2017: 169). Hence, certain racialised queer people are given discursive space in these homonationalist discourses if their experiences, voices, and actions can be rendered

amenable—either by themselves or by others—to frames that 'prove' that the threatening alterity of the 'Other' is best dealt with violent exclusions and 'Self' supremacy.

5.6.2. Navigating through Homonationalism and Homophobia

Heike explores the transformation of the concept of homonationalism from 'homonationalism 1', which was introduced by Puar initially in the book *Terrorist Assemblages*, to the more expansive concept of 'homonationalism 2' found in the later writings by Puar and those by Maya Mikdashi (2012). While 'homonationalism 1' explores how specific social contexts, specifically that of contemporary US, produce political dynamics that include certain queer subjects—mostly those who are the most privileged in their social positionality compared to others in the queer spectrum, like white, cis-gender, gay men—within nationalistic projects in ways that reproduce not only exclusionary gender and kinship norms, but also racial, class, and national ones. On the other hand, the concept of 'homonationalism 2' describes 'a feature of modernity and an index of fitness for sovereignty' (Schotten 2016: 361), i.e., it is a contemporary variation of imperialism. By locating homonationalism as a constitutive element of modernity itself, Puar expands the concept to refer to an ever-present 'field of power' rather than an activity, a position, or a property of any individual, organisation, or nation-state: 'We are all subjects produced through, not despite or against, homonationalism' (2017: 231). Hence, homonationalisms are conceptualised as a constitutive field of modern socio-political reality and the agency any subject can practise within this field is a question of negotiation and resistance that occurs within the logics of homonationalism rather than from any external positionality.

Furthermore, homonationalism 2 can possibly indict all queer solidarity and emancipatory politics as the concept describes the broader structure within which politics

happens rather than a *type* of politics, i.e., anti-racist and anti-imperial queer organising and resistance not only engages with, but crucially, functions *within* homonationalism. When framed in this way resistance to homonationalism 'not only fails to disrupt homonationalism but, more importantly, it fails to disrupt the larger imperial project' (Schotten 2016: 365). In this understanding of homonationalism complicity is no longer an option that can be critiqued but an inevitability that implicates everyone who engages with queer rights either in solidarity or opposition. This makes the concept less viable as a critique since it points to an inevitable feature of existing in the modern world, which also raises the question of what, if anything, can undo a feature of social structure that is viewed as inevitable?

Looking at the queer Muslim responses to the EEGP, Aleardo Zanghellini, Professor of Law and Social Theory at the University of Reading, asks the provocative question: Are gay rights Islamophobic? At first this question seems theoretically untenable as it implies an essentialist unidimensional relationship of power and rights between certain social groupings. Understanding power from a Foucauldian perspective, power can be viewed as multiple relations of force that are exercised in interactions between people—hence it is a bottom-up phenomenon—in dynamic, often contradictory ways, leading to systemic discursive formations that constrain individual interactions but never without resistance and change (Foucault 1978: 92–93; Heller 1996). Hence, while an antagonistic power flow in the rights of two social categories of people constructed within a particular discourse—in this case the homonationalist discourse—and articulated within social practices, laws, and institutions can become a hegemonic discourse in a particular discursive field, it is still never the only discourse or an all-encompassing, static, and essential aspect of that discursive field. Not only does the homonationalist discourse emerge from socio-historical contexts and

processes, but the discourse also evolves, competes, cooperates, borrows, and gets transformed with changing socio-historical contexts, discourses, and social practices.

The power to create social realities also shifts over time and space for the homonationalist discourse with certain places and historical moments providing fertile ground while others being less hospitable. Therefore, the homonationalist discourse and the worlds it creates are best viewed as part of a dynamic and contextual discursive field rather than an essential component of LGBTQIA+ rights. Margaret Denike writes about the possibility of, as well as the need for, non-homonationalist critiques of anti-queer beliefs and practices as bodies that are marked as queer within contemporary identarian frameworks continue to be subjected to violence and differential treatment not only in the 'Other' but also by 'millions of folks in the same "security" states and "liberal democracies" that have recently found patriotic allies among its LGBT communities' (2010: 98). As long as those identity discourses have social currency in terms of not only forming subjectivities but as the basis for directing hate and exclusion towards the subjects identified and formed within these discourses, they will remain indispensable as tools 'to chip away at the hold of homophobia in the public domain (2010: 98)'.

The question for Denike, given Puar's critique, is how the tools for fighting anti-queer violence and hate can be re-articulated in ways that do not dispossess racial Others or frames that do not rely on 'Other-ing' processes? She claims that Puar's theoretical methods 'remain open' to such questions that 'take us back' to representational and identarian frames that do not perpetuate racialised Other-ing, thereby this would 'effectively annihilate the veracity of her [Puar's] own critique' of those frames. Specifically, these are contexts where either homonationalism is merely an 'illusion,' queer inclusion in the national body is

marginal or non-existent, or queer inclusion occurs in ways that are not conjoined with racial imperial logics, for instance in the discourses of queer Muslims (2010: 98).

However, discourses are always subject to change as they get impacted by interior and exterior forces. Foucault describes this relational character of discourse and power as such: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault 1978: 95). This suggests that while there is no exterior'positionality to power and the discourses that shape power relations, the discursive fields do not have a fixed core but are fluid and in a state of constant flux. Societies have multiple systems of power linked to specific discourses that overlap and intersect, and people can resist specific discourses and power relations only through being subjects that are already embedded within *other* overlapping discourses that have their own power relations. Resistance can then be seen as 'a diagnostic of power' that helps to 'detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990: 48).

Viewing the question posed by Zanghellini, which was mentioned earlier, within this theoretical framework, we can appreciate that it has a rhetorical role meant to provoke deeper insight into both the homonationalist discourses and the social practices, activism, subjectivities, and communities being impacted by, and engaging with these discourses in some way. He raises this question to critique some of the ways the discourse of homonationalism has been understood within certain academic and activist contexts. Specifically, he questions the validity of claims that assume that there are social contexts where the discourses related to the rights of queer people are so inherently and inextricably

'bound up with Islamophobic processes' that there are no alternatives, negotiations, discussions, challenges, or change possible (2012a: 369).

Hence, Zanghellini critiques 'the overuse' of homonationalism as an explanatory tool and questions the degree of power homonationalist discourses possess in specific social contexts (2012a: 369). Instead of theorising homonationalist discourses as hegemonic master discourses from which escape is almost untenable and where most social actions will result in unwitting or deliberate complicity, a more context-specific theorisation can explore the conditions and actions where not only can articulations of homonationalism be disrupted, but alternative and potentially anti-racist and intersectional queer discourses can be championed. This point seems to be supported by an analysis of public opinions related to LGBTQIA+ rights and race in different European nations which do not usually show that increasing queer-affirming views are linked to increasing racist or xenophobic view (Freude & Vergés Bosch 2020).

Zanghellini offers his critique of all-encompassing theorisations of homonationalisms by focusing on the queer Muslim activist stance taken by Decolonize Queer and, hence, a stance that is well-represented within the diversity of views within IMI, especially at the level of the official organisational approach, values, and history. Writing about Puar's book, *Terrorist Assemblages*, Zanghellini critiques Puar's claim that homonationalism is so hegemonic that all discourses around queer Muslims occurs through its lens: 'It makes a considerable difference to *Terrorist Assemblages* whether or not one accepts this sweeping and groundless claim. If one does, the incidents that Puar describes will appear not merely as instances in which a certain rhetoric (queer secularity), certain resources (gay rights), or a certain politics (queer belonging) are *mis*used for Islamophobic ends; rather, *all* of them will

appear as the inevitable and orchestrated outcomes of that rhetoric, those resources, and that politics' (Zanghellini 2012a: 366). If Islamophobia is viewed as the enabling condition within the genealogy of LGBTQIA+ rights then it makes the latter impossible without the former (Puar 2017: 128). This unwittingly replicates the logic and assumptions embedded within the discourse of homonationalism while offering a critique of it and suggesting alternatives. Although alternatives to homonationalism are acknowledged as a possibility they are either not defined fully, or viewed as existing only within the discourses and activism of specific QPOC networks (Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017).

On the other hand, homonationalist discourses and policies also complement parallel discourses *within* Muslim minority communities that accept the logic of an inherent opposition between queer rights and Muslim rights. These narratives advocate Muslim rights, freedoms, and respect through the idiom of opposing LGBTQIA+ rights since they are equated with securitisation and imperialistic power relations. The counter-discourses that resist processes of racialised surveillance and discrimination against British Muslims can also accept the oppositional logic constructed within homonationalist discursive structures, i.e., that Muslim rights and queer rights are oppositional (Zanghellini 2012a). For instance, the result of some state policies that link processes of racialised surveillance with programmes meant to combat prejudices and exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people partly motivate the protests of some Muslim parents in Birmingham.

Furthermore, homonationalist discourses do not necessarily have a fixed antagonistic 'Other' that is constant through time and space. The Self-Other boundary constituted through the symbol of queerness and sexual liberation can, and does, function with varying different constituencies that do not have Muslims or Islam as its primary Other. For instance,

homonationalism can enact ‘a biopolitical geosexual marker of difference’ between Eastern and Western Europe (Renkin 2016; Trofimov 2019). The focus on gay rights within the EU has led to the discursive construction of Eastern Europe as anti-queer not only within Western European nationalisms but also by the various nationalist and populist discourses establishing themselves in Eastern Europe in response to an ascendant EU (Kulpa 2014; Slootmaeckers et al. 2016). Hence, LGBTQIA+ rights being perceived as a form of ‘Western cultural imperialism’ is not essentially linked to Islam but to broader processes of group and boundary constructions. This can be seen in non-Muslim contexts—like Poland, Hungary, and Russia or in African countries, like Uganda—where a values and culture-based boundary is constructed with Western Europe that results in increasingly violent, exclusionary, and demonising laws against queer people (Kizito 2017; Mos 2020).

Therefore, the process of turning values, laws, and social practices related to how one perceives and treats queer people as identificatory symbols for the Self, community, and nation varies with context. Communities and nations in the greater Global South[57] are in constant dialogue with global discursive formations emanating from the ‘core’ resulting in the hegemonic discourses in each context evolving in entangled ways. Ironically, many anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses and legislation in post-colonial nations are the result of complex engagements with modernity and colonialism rather than a representation of being ‘primitive’ or ‘non-Western’ (Rao 2020).

[57] Greater global north to include not only the global South but also ‘an assemblage of nations and regions within the so-called developed/First World/global North’ (Lind & Martínez-Echazábal 2016: xii), highlights the porosity and overlap of the type of comparative social positionalities and realities that are meant to describe the global South as ones that exist in different spaces across the postcolonial divide within the North as well as the South.

The process can be described by Gregory Bateson's concept of 'schismogenesis,' which describes the psycho-social tendency of people to define themselves against one another in a way where certain groups of people share a common system of differences that help them consolidate and reciprocally constitute their identities as opposites (Bateson 1980). David Graeber and David Wengrow also apply this concept to answer the question: 'Why do different social groups that are very familiar with each other's technologies, knowledge, values, and social structures—and that share and adopt many of these with each other—self-consciously exaggerate differences in certain key domains?' Their answer is that these differences are not primarily about 'efficiency', i.e., rational choice decisions based on economic factors, but about 'politics,' which may include economic considerations but as one factor among many that relate to the 'questions about values, about what humans really are (and consider themselves to be), and how they should properly relate to one another' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021: 175).

One of the examples they used to illustrate the ways societies come to define themselves against one another is by describing how the complex indigenous foraging societies of the Pacific coast of California and Canada before the large-scale influx of settlers in the mid-nineteenth century constituted themselves into clear 'cultural areas' of the Northwest coast and the California coast. While slavery was commonplace on the Northwest coast it was non-existent in the California coast. They argue that these differences emerge together and are sustained due to a schismogenetic process where these societies self-consciously define themselves as people who choose different conclusions on ethics, human nature, spirituality, or metaphysics from the ones chosen by the 'Other'.

Similarly, Marcel Mauss analysed the differences between different 'cultural areas' as the result not of a lack of knowledge, understanding, or interaction but of 'structures of refusal': 'societies live by borrowing from each other, but they define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance' (2006: 44). Thus, in an increasingly globalised world it is less plausible to consider differences in cultural, legal, and national attitudes related to LGBTQIA+ people as a difference resulting from some process of 'being behind' in terms of a uniform developmental civilisational timeline, or the result of a lack of knowledge, familiarity, presence, or awareness of queer people. Instead, according to the concept of schismogenesis, these differences are the product of how these different human groups—whether defined as ethnicities, nationalities, classes, religious communities, etc.—choose to define themselves in relation to an 'Other'. These differences can be viewed as part of the political choices that emerge from the types of core questions that structure social groups that Graeber and Wengrow point towards (Graeber & Wengrow 2021: 209).

As queer rights become an international discourse there are concurrent articulations of hetero-patriarchies that are linked, but opposed, to the homonationalist discourses operating within Western core contexts. The hegemonic anti-colonial and nationalistic discourses in a number of post-colonial contests also come to instrumentalise Queerness as key in identity construction and boundary-work, but this time expressed as a negation (Slootmaeckers 2019). Hence, in such contexts there is a similar 'ideology of protection' as seen within homonationalist discourses but it is the Self, nation, Islam, culture, family, and community that has to be protected from 'the white man's disease' rather than the protection of queer people from the homophobic 'Other' (Dhawan 2016: 59).

Therefore, these contemporary postcolonial national discourses engage with new forms of international governance operating under the banner of the 'Homosexual Question' in similar ways as previous engagements with colonial administrations operating under the 'Woman Question'. Instead of imperialistic processes justifying themselves on grounds of, using Spivak's terminology (Spivak 1988), liberating 'brown women from brown men,' they now *also* employ queer rights as a form of neo-colonial disciplining within and across national boundaries (Puar 2011: 139). The hegemonic anticolonial resolution to the Woman Question was a splitting where national sovereignty was imagined as an acceptance of, or borrowing of, discourses and practices that will lead to the kind of material advancement seen in the West, while simultaneously 'refusing' to allow borrowing in the domains of gender and sexuality as they were seen as the source of spiritual, moral, and cultural authenticity and superiority (Chatterjee 2004). Similarly, contemporary queerphobic postcolonial nationalisms also aim to 'shield the cultural from new forms of international governmentality that remain haunted by the memory of colonial intervention in the Woman Question' (Rao 2014: 203).

5.7. CONCLUSION

Shanon Shah describes how gay Muslims in Malaysia as well as Britain navigate very different cultural landscapes that still share a dominant discourse that views Islam as incommensurable with an acceptance of gender, affective, and sexual variance. Specifically, homosexuality and Islam are placed within these very different social contexts in similarly fundamentally opposed ways (2018). This results in social practices and institutions that manifest this belief and discourse as a concrete social reality, but in the different guises of

British right-wing homonationalism targeting British Muslims or in the Malaysian state Islamisation targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Hence, discourses of Islamic queer negativity are part of the cultural field in these two different contexts, and they are internalised by all cultural agents as an aspect of socialisation, including by LGBTQIA+ Muslims themselves. Therefore, Shah's interviews of gay Muslims explore the inevitability of navigating the ramifications of existing within discursive fields that assume a natural opposition of two important aspects of their sense of self. The queer Muslims who are spiritually and socially connected to Islam, while at the same time accepting of the non-normative nature of their gender and sexuality, navigate different pathways which eventually lead to some discursive intervention that involves building a bridge that connects the 'incommensurable' domains of Islam and their gender and sexuality within the dominant discursive formations of their contexts. Shah claims that 'studying people who choose to cross supposedly unbridgeable boundaries' provides a vantage point that can help us 'develop richer insights on religious and sexual identity' (2018: 307).

Similarly, understanding the activism of British progressive Muslims—queer and allies alike—challenging homonationalism makes visible the assumptions and power relations that are not as visible when focusing primarily on social groups and contexts where the dominant discursive fields construct bridges linking Islamic subjectivities with non-cis and non-hetero subjectivities as unimaginable, impossible, inauthentic, impractical, unnatural, and/or unethical. Not only do these progressive Muslims actively grapple with queerphobia in their religious communities but also with the mirror of that incommensurability within homonationalist discourses. They are not simply recipients and

passive victims of these discourses and are able to construct queer affirmative religious discourses, practices, communities, and institutions that challenge the logic and application of both homonationalism as well as queerphobia.

6. Sexual Identities and the IMI

This chapter deals with how Progressive Muslims try to make sense of their lives, or those of the members of their families, as LGBTQIA+ Muslims. It may be pointed out that in this chapter the hermeneutical devices discussed in chapter 2, are manifested through the dynamic interaction of religious guides and teachers with ordinary Muslim in need of guidance. The process of interpretation and the quest for meaning, therefore, is not academic but interactive, immediate and humanly significant. It aims to give an idea of how doubly marginalised Muslims try to find meaning through the power of the word—more spoken this time though also occasionally written.

6.1. 'WHAT DOES THE QUR'ĀN SAY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?': PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM HERMENEUTICS ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The 'Queer Muslim Question' in its various guises is frequently brought to the *imāms* and congregants at IMI by not only queer Muslims themselves but also by their Muslim family members and other loved ones. Due to these frequent requests, the board and volunteers at the IMI felt that there was a need for a space where family members of queer Muslims could meet each other to provide mutual support, share experiences, and grapple with the topic of non-normative gender and sexuality from an Islamic perspective. From these discussions came the plan to offer a series of events entitled '*Our Ummah: Supporting our LGBT family members*'.

The first event was held in a mosque in inner London on a Saturday in November 2017 specifically for Muslim family members of LGBT Muslims. I attended the event as an IMI volunteer and a doctoral student researcher and had also been present in earlier meetings within the IMI that discussed the rationale, content, and organisation of the event. I have

changed the names of all the participants at the event, even for those who are otherwise open and active in public discussions, publications, and activism around these issues, due to the important role that confidentiality plays at such events in facilitating vulnerability and openness with sharing challenging experiences, thoughts, and emotions.

The mosque was chosen as the venue as it actively supported the IMI and publicly championed human rights, diversity, and inclusion within Muslim communities on their website, programmes, and sermons. Although the mosque had a primarily Turkish congregation, it was actively welcoming of all Muslims and seeking to diversify its congregation. The trustees of the mosque had reserved the large central prayer hall of the mosque for this event and the IMI had invited a classically trained Islamic scholar, or Shaykh, who was also a researcher on Islamic theology at the University of Cambridge, giving the event a distinctively religious focus and atmosphere. The managers of the mosque provided a warm welcome to the IMI organisers and the attendees on the day of the event and had also opened the mosque's kitchen and dining area for serving lunch to the attendees of the event.

Since the event was occurring in the main prayer hall of the mosque, there would be small groups of men who would enter to offer their *ṣalāh* during prayer times. There were fifteen people who were part of the event, including the organisers and volunteers, consisting primarily of the mothers of lesbian or queer Muslim women, with a couple of fathers and siblings of other queer Muslims (gay and bi men) present as well. The group was placed in the middle of the large prayer hall, and the seating arrangement varied during the event: with attendees sitting in rows of chairs facing the Shaykh when he was giving his talk or seated in a circle when sharing personal experiences and discussing ideas.

Some of the attendees later provided the feedback to the IMI organisers that they felt uncomfortable being in the main prayer hall given that it was being actively used for prayers. They mentioned that despite being in the prayer hall and discussing Islam they chose not to join the *ṣalāh* congregation during the prayer times (for various reasons), which made them feel self-conscious. Furthermore, they also felt awkward since people who were not part of the event were entering the same space and could potentially hear their sensitive discussions. On the other hand, a few attendees remarked that they appreciated being in the main hall of a mosque as this was the first time in their lives when these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects of their lives could be brought together spatially, theologically, and emotionally.

One of the trustees of the IMI, Lamia, opened the event with an introduction to the mosque and to the IMI. Lamia described that the main aim of the IMI was to provide a safe space for the practise of an inclusive Islam focused on the promotion of the equality and dignity of all Muslims, particularly those who are marginalised within Muslim and broader communities. Hence, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and racial justice are core areas around which they aim to build and practise Islam. She then introduced the group to Mahmud, a British-Pakistani gay lawyer and activist based in London, who had initiated this series of events.

Mahmud pointed to his parents, who were present at this event, and shared how his parents—particularly his mother—had a long and, as he put it, ‘arduous journey reconciling her religion and culture with his sexual orientation’. To support his mother through her process he had once taken her to a support group for South Asian parents of LGB children organised by Naz and Matt Foundation—a charity based in the UK that aims to tackle homophobia triggered by religious and cultural beliefs. At the event they found themselves to

be the *only* Muslim parent-child in attendance, which was a disappointment for them as it was precisely concerns about the implications of his sexuality in terms of their religious beliefs that his mother wanted support and resources from people with similar experiences. This experience motivated Mahmud to search for a space where Muslims with LGBT family members could meet, chat, and support each other. Since he could not find any in existence in London, he approached the IMI and collaboratively set up this event. He concluded that the key message for today was: 'Feel safe enough to be honest in sharing and processing thoughts, emotions, and experiences that might otherwise be deemed offensive or inappropriate in other contexts.'

Lamia then introduced the Islamic scholar, Shaykh Muhammad, to the attendees as a classically as well as Western-trained Islamic scholar focusing on Arabic grammar, Islamic theology, and Islamic law. Sheets of paper with Qur'ānic verses were handed out. Shaykh Muhammad began with reciting *Bismillāh* ('In the name of Allah') and encouraging the attendees to ask questions. He began with reciting the Qur'ānic verse, 17:70, in Arabic and then translated it in English, focusing on the words: 'We have conferred dignity to the Children of Adam,' i.e., all of humanity. Then he recited the verse, 49:13, translated it, and focused on the part: 'The most noble among you are the ones who are the most righteous'. Followed by a *ḥadīth* from the *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* collection, one of the six major *ḥadīth* collections in Sunni Islam, that stated that the only basis of judging people is through their *taqwá* or the level of a person's 'God consciousness'. The Shaykh pointed to his heart and said, 'You can only judge people *through* your heart and according to what is *in* their heart and how they treat other living beings. The most basic legal maxim in *fiqh* [Islamic law] is that no law should cause harm to people.'

Hence, the Shaykh's opening approach to this topic began with verses that focus on the equal and intrinsic dignity of human beings, and a theory of morality that ties the Divine moral framework as a domain that humans can universally understand and share. Furthermore, it is based on the idea that this universal Divine morality is not just tied to scriptures but can be accessed through the application of reason guided by moral ends that are measured through human[58] experiences of suffering and wellbeing, i.e., ethical objectivism based on experiential 'data'(Hourani 1980). Progressive Muslims consider Revelation as complementing rather than transcending innate human reason when it comes to understanding and evaluating ethics (Sachedina 2015). Hence, ethical values have an ontologically objective status in progressive Muslim thought (Attar 2010).

The Qur'ānic conception of the creation of humanity is read by progressive Muslims as one based on the 'ontology of a single Self,' where human diversity does not preclude a shared ethical/moral and spiritual nature, i.e., the belief that all people were created from a 'single *nafs*,' where *nafs* can be defined as a Self, Person, or Divine Self (Barlas 2002: 157–159). This is contrasted with' ethical voluntarism,' which claims that ethical concepts can be understood *only* in terms of God's will which shapes and informs human conscience rather than being subject to evaluation from an independent human conscience. Related to this is 'traditionalism,' which claims that humans can never independently access what is morally

[58] Islamic humanism has often been the focus of progressive Muslim theology and ethics (2003a). Increasingly, progressive Muslim discourses and practices link human welfare to the welfare of animals and the protection of the environment, conceptualized as humanity's duty as Allah has described humanity in the Qur'an as God's viceregents on earth (*khilafah*) who have been given the earth as a 'trust' (*ammanah*) (deHanas 2009; Ramadan 2008) . More radical progressive Muslim approaches decentre humans as the ends of all ethics and spirituality, while at the same time reconnecting humans to a larger web of living beings within complex planet-wide ecological and material systems (Nasr 1997). These re-positionings of humanity often relies on Sufi perspectives based on the concept of *tawhīd*—unity, interconnection, and Oneness of Allah, and interpreted in this context as Oneness of all beings and things (variously described as Reality, Cosmos, Material World, The Seen, The Created) with the Divine (Mesbahi 2012). Hence, environmentalism, animal rights, climate change, and biodiversity have also become important concerns within progressive Muslim discourses and practices.

right and, hence, must depend on Revelation (Reinhart 1995). The Shaykh's approach is noteworthy as it is part of the core Islamic principles that define what it means to be 'progressive Muslims,' according to the edited volume, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Safi 2003a). As mentioned in Chapter 1, this text forms one of the key touchstones that progressive Muslim academics, activists, and lay people refer to in constructing their own discourses and practices in the post 9/11 context.

Furthermore, the emphasis on 'heart' in the hermeneutics of Islamic Revelation and Law is significant, as it was often present in progressive Muslim discourses during my fieldwork. The emphasis on paying attention to, and being aware and reflective of, embodied sensations, affective states, and phenomenological experiences—a hermeneutical approach to Islam that I have labelled 'spiritual'—is key to the way many progressive Muslims find *meaning* in Islam, find Islam *meaningful*, and shape themselves as Muslim subjects.

Moreover, the Shaykh's approach is also a good example of how the two modes of progressive Muslim hermeneutics—the 'spiritual' and 'intellectual,' which I described earlier—are in practice interconnected and interrelated. For instance, here the Shaykh employs an Iintellectual hermeneutics that emphasises close reading of Islamic textual sources and the application of reason-based historical, literary, and critical hermeneutical tools which, in turn, require an attention to the Spiritual approach of paying attention to embodied experiences to access the Divine ethical values that guide decisions about which hermeneutical tools, as well as which readings and meanings, are chosen out of other reasonable alternatives.

As the Shaykh was elaborating on the principles upon which Islamic law is constructed, as understood within the progressive Muslim approach[59], one of the women in the group interrupted him with visible agitation. This was an older White woman wearing a hijab who had earlier introduced herself as a convert—she used the term 'revert'—with a daughter who had come out to her as a lesbian a few years ago. I will refer to her as 'Mother A': 'These are general positive comments, but I am here to make sense of the negative comments about homosexuality in Islam. The punishments and the forbidding and judgments, etc. I don't want to waste the limited time we have on these positive, general aspects when the issue is the negative comments in the Qur'ān about homosexuality.' Similarly, a Black, middle-aged, woman who also had a daughter who had recently come out to her as a lesbian, whom I will refer to as 'Mother B,' also spoke up in agreement that she wanted to discuss the verses that are more troubling for her: 'So, my question is related to the concept of harm and care that you are referring to in these sources. We are supposed to not do any harm. Isn't the issue that, according to Islam, there *is* harm if you choose to lie with someone of the same sex? The harm to the soul when a person commits a sin that Allah has forbidden?'

These two comments made it clear that the attendees were interested in pivoting the focus to the verses, beliefs, and rules/laws that they considered challenging to reaching a sense of a comfortable reconciliation with the identities and relationships of their queer loved ones. Although the event included multiple, sometimes parallel conversations, for the sake of

[59] Here, again, the Shaykh was faithful to the academic and theological interpretational assumptions that define the 'progressive Muslim approach towards Islamic legal theory (*ʾUṣūl al-Fiqh*), i.e., an ethico-religious purpose-based approach to Islamic law (*al-maqāṣid al-sharīʾah*) where the goal of any expression of law is human wellbeing through justice and compassion (Auda 2008). For a comparative study of the 'progressive Muslim' approach with other traditional and modern Islamic approaches, see Duderija (2011).

clarity I will focus on two themes in the following sections that emerged most frequently and clearly in the group: Are queer Muslim subjectivities, identities, and relationships Islamic? Secondly, what are the *Islamic ways* of expressing and practising queer Muslim identities and relationships?

6.1.1. The Question-Answer Approach

A large part of the day was spent in looking at various Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* that are usually interpreted as condemning same-sex sexualities, relationships, and identities, while diversity in gender identity was not discussed much. The attendees were keen on understanding what these Islamic sources meant in terms of how they should understand, classify, relate to, and care for their LGB family members.

The attendees asked the Shaykh about the Islamic understanding of the Prophet Lot's message to his people. For instance, was he sent by Allah to warn his people against same-sex sexual activities? Were the people of Lot punished because they refused to stop such activities? One attendee said that he had heard and read that the account of the Prophet Lot was specifically about 'the sin of sodomy'. The Shaykh replied:

> If a belief is mainstream, it doesn't mean it is correct or that it has always been mainstream. Islamic law has always been about power. Who has the power to make them? Both Ibn Hanbal and Abu Hanifa [founders of two of the four mainstream contemporary Sunni legal schools] were imprisoned. Most major jurists were persecuted in some way because they took positions divergent from established positions of their context, yet today these are the mainstream ones. If you look at the earliest commentaries on the Qur'ān you find the references that they interpreted the sin of the people of Lot as sexual violence, humiliation, rape, disobedience of Allah. There has always been discussion among the scholars from the beginning, but the discussion was not about sexual orientation or consensual same-sex relationships at that time. There were gatherings of learning in the places of power, the caliph's palace for instance, where homosexuality was discussed and even practised. Sexual diversity was part of the culture.

The Shaykh's response to questions about how the Islamic discursive tradition constructs the phenomenon of 'same-sex sexuality' does not reify religion or Muslim culture, but immediately places it within a social constructionist framework with an emphasis on shifting power relations.

This is a common discursive practice among progressive Muslims, as Adis Duderija (2011) described in his comparative analysis of progressive Muslim approaches to history. Duderija specifically placed the progressive Muslim academic and theological literature within the 'genealogical approach' developed by Foucault, and later elaborated by Talal Asad, focusing on the *constructed-ness* and dynamism of Islamic tradition and the role of power relations in how the discursive tradition develops and enacts itself in social interactions.

Demonstrating this approach the Shaykh highlighted that earlier generations of Muslim scholars, and Muslim culture overall, had a more tolerant, if not accepting, approach to same-sex desire and relations, he did not present it as an example of an authentic or 'pure' Islamic past that is now corrupted by non-Islamic innovations and influences (*bidʾah*). Instead, he invited the attendees to view *all* Islamic beliefs, interpretations, laws, and practices within a socio-historical context, whether they are from the past or present, and desacralized them by emphasising that they are products of evolving human debates, judgments, and discussions that seek to understand 'Divine Truth' but can only be more or less accurate approximations of it. For instance, when another attendee asked, 'But was this [discourses and practices of same-sex desire] acceptable? Was it considered ethical and Islamic?...Did the Prophet punish people for homosexuality?' The Shaykh responded:

> The people who engaged in it thought so [it was ethical], while there were others who advised not to go to these gatherings. And if you read the biographies of scholars of that era it was often mentioned that so and so was attracted to 'boys' and it was often mentioned as just a fact without additional evaluation. Diversity existed but this doesn't mean they were agreeing with each other on whether it is correct or not. The difference was that they weren't killing each other over it; agreeing to disagree; still belonging to one community. This was happening when the schools of law were being formulated and you find there was no agreement on the punishment for same-sex sexual acts. The Ḥanafīh position was that there is no punishment whatsoever. Yet, you find it today. People being thrown from buildings. No verse says there is punishment and no authentic *ḥadīth* on punishment, although some *akhbār-i āhād* [solitary source] *ḥadīth* do [mention punishments], but the Ḥanafīh view is that these were not reliable. You cannot administer punishment without a clear text from the Qur'ān and *mutawātir*[60] *ḥadīth*. If [this was] such a big issue, then why no clear injunctions?... This is where we need to distinguish between *fiqh* and the Qur'ān. *Fiqh* is completely a human endeavour and product of human interpretation. There is so much diversity in the *fiqh* and no agreement on this. *Hadīth* scholars were unanimous they were not authentic.

Some of the attendees said they found it surprising and liberating to consider that what they believed to be, as one person said 'an unchanging sacred rule,' could be a result of other human beings engaging in a series of debates within various socio-political contexts that impacted the conclusions of the debates, i.e., the Sacred could have a history. Fatima, one of organisers at the IMI, explored this idea further:

> Let's look at specific Islamic texts. The Qur'ānic verses on Lot. What are now considered traditional interpretations…But who is doing that interpretation? I think of it in terms of being immersed in patriarchy and that informs our interpretations. I ask why is it that two men being together sexually is more threatening to society than two women? What about that is more threatening? This is where gender justice becomes important. Islamic feminism is

[60] Considered the most reliable type of *ḥadīth* due to the presence of a significant number of narrators at each level across multiple chains of narration.

> one lens to re-shift. Islam began with people who were at the margins of their society. The Prophet was an orphan.

Hence, the historical and contemporary interpretations of the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* corpus, and the legal schools (*fiqh*) were explored through a 'genealogical lens' during this event. This resulted in an 'interpretive opening' where the attendees were encouraged by the Shaykh to interpret the Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* themselves in ways that not only made sense to them on an intellectual level (reason or *ʿaql*) but also at an emotional and Spiritual level with the repeated encouragements to listen to 'the heart' (*qalb*).

These encouragements to interpret Islamic sources 'independently' and in 'personally meaningful' ways, i.e., to engage in personal *ijtihād*, may differ sharply in its rhetoric from approaches that convey the importance of 'correctly' following expert, scholarly, and 'official' textual interpretations and legal consensus (*taqlīd*), but in practice this is a matter of change in the *degree* rather than the *kind* of personal Islamic meaning-making. After all, all interpretations of Islamic sources occur within and through the 'Con-Text of Revelation,' the discursive tradition of Islam, and the social context of the believer and, hence, never fully an independent authorial invention—whether the interpreter is an expert or a lay person. In many ways, ideas are structured by the nature of a discourse at a particular time and context; and, while an author may be the first to write them down in their own language, they may be circulating in different forms in the discursive field. We are 'thinking society's thoughts' as much as forming our own relationships to those 'society's thoughts', as Foucault argues, discourses construct the subject that is given the role of the originator of a discourse, i.e., the author-function is ideological, variable, contextual, and structured by the discourse they are immersed within (Foucault 2000).

On the other hand, there is always some level of agency in personal meaning-making even when a person is claiming to simply follow an expert or authority figure. For instance, Twelver Shīʻi Islam is often viewed as a 'paradigmatic example' of centralised and hierarchical religious authority, but a 'bottom-up' sociological perspective demonstrates that religious authority in practice is more 'de-centered,' eclectic, and not restricted to legalism (Clarke & Künkler 2018). Thus, what differentiates the progressive Muslim approach from other approaches to Islam is its advocacy of a broader, individualised, and personalised answer to the questions: *Who* is considered capable of legitimate meaning-making from the Islamic texts and to *what* extent? In the progressive Muslim approach, due to the understanding of Islamic Revelation as being multi-dimensional and polysemic, Divine Truth can be considered as accessible to each seeker or reader of the Revelation through the prism of their own situated, socio-historically constructed mind/body. This led to some attendees asking if this meant that people can simply interpret the Text according to personal whims, desires, selfish needs, or power, etc.? The Shaykh replied that accessing Divine Truth can only occur through genuine faith and daily practises of Islam which shape the *ʿaql* and *qalb*' of the believer to be able to not only understand but *feel* Allah's Reality.

6.1.2 The 'Intellectual' Hermeneutical Approach in Practice

The ways the attendees engaged with and made sense of what Islamic sources, specifically the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh*, meant for their personal beliefs, practices, and relationships was a long conversation. In this section I will highlight examples of some common hermeneutic strategies employed in these discussions. The group reframed contemporary mainstream interpretations on homosexuality by contextualising and historicising them. Followed by alternative interpretations of the Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* that were considered the most challenging to their ability to accept LGBTQ+ relationships and identities. The alternative

more queer-affirming interpretations of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* that were explored by the group were heavily informed by how the Shaykh framed the texts, which in turn reflected the approach evident in progressive Muslim literature, particularly Scott Kugle's book, *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010). I will highlight some parts of conversations where the group collectively practiced 'independently' interpreting relevant Qur'ānic verses guided by the Shaykh.

The group read the verses either on hard copies of the Qur'ān or on their phones over the internet. The Shaykh first recited the verses in Arabic and then gave his own English translation of the verses while asking others to read out to the group what the translation was for the Qur'ān they were reading. Since the attendees were reading different Qur'ān translations, they found that there were often substantial differences in how the translators had chosen to interpret and translate the verses from the Arabic with frequent word additions in brackets. The Shaykh explained to some people who were confused or surprised by this variation that adding words in brackets is standard practice to clarify the meaning of the text, but in the process translations inevitably add a layer of interpretation to the original text.

Hence, the attendees were encouraged to be more aware of the layers of meaning added to the Qur'ānic text by *other* people that they assumed to be the unmediated Word of God. Similarly, the Shaykh introduced different hermeneutical tools for the attendees to employ in making sense of what they were reading and then encouraged discussion of the meanings they derive using those tools, and how those meanings applied to their own lives. For example, one of the attendees brought up *Sūrah Ash-Shu'ara* (26:160-174) as a part of the Qur'ān he struggled with when it came to reconciling homosexuality with Islam.

Questioner: 'It says that they lusted after men even though Allah has made wives (*zauj*) for them. The sexual orientation is being condemned here?'

Shaykh: 'The term *zauj* in the Arabic expression here is gender neutral. It does not necessarily mean wife as it has been translated. It can simply be read as that they had partners but went after these male angels who were guests of Lot.'

Here the Shaykh was highlighting the hermeneutical tool of paying attention to semantics and the additional interpretation and meanings added to the original text by translators. Additionally, he was bringing focus to how all interpretations are embedded within historically situated discourses which have their own pre-suppositions and assumptions that can make certain interpretations unthinkable. In this case, the word 'partner' (*zauj*) is automatically gendered by interpreters, translators, and readers due to prior heterosexist assumptions, for instance that the only socially legitimate partner for all men within Islamic contexts are the opposite sex. Shaykh: 'Let's go with the interpretation that *zauj* means wives here. Then the sin being referred to still does not have to do with sexual orientation. These are men who already have wives. Heterosexual. Yet they go out to commit acts of sexual violence on other men.'

The Shaykh was untangling assumptions embedded within modern and popular constructions of homosexuality which do not necessarily accord with the construction of sex, gender, and identity in the pre-modern context. While the modern construction of homosexuality often conflates sexual actions/behaviours, social identities, and sexual orientations, the Shaykh was pointing that 'sexual acts' do not necessarily reflect a person's 'sexual orientation,' or form the basis of their 'social identity' in all socio-historical contexts. In this case, he was claiming that the sexual orientation and social identity of the men being

described in these verses could be considered ‘heterosexual,’ even if they were engaging in homosexual ‘sexual acts’.

Attendee X: ‘So is the crime they are about to commit…rape or sodomy or both?...What is the word in the Qur’ān that is used to refer to sodomy, if sodomy is not in the Qur’ān itself? ‘

Shaykh: ‘I will read the verse, 26:168, the translator adds the term sodomy, but the verse only says I severely disapprove of your ‘actions’.’

X: ‘But if the actions being referred to are not sodomy, then what are the actions being severely disapproved of?’

Shaykh: ‘In the context of the verse, it is sexual violence and violation. The problem is the insertion of the term sodomy by the translators here which makes it about the type of act related to the gender rather than consent, violence, and violation of the act.’

In this interaction, the Shaykh was highlighting that given our prior assumptions when we read about a condemnation of a sexual act that is between people of the same sex, the object of the condemnation appears to be obvious to most modern readers: homosexuality. This forecloses questions about whether ‘same-sex’ acts can signify more than just the gender of the participants in different social contexts? Hence, questioning whether the condemnation in these verses is about a *particular* socio-cultural deployment of homosexuality or with homosexuality *in general*? For instance, one of the organisers from the IMI noted that when heterosexual acts are condemned in religious discourse, it is ‘common sense’ due to our prior assumptions that the issue is not heterosexuality per se but a specific way of engaging in it.

The attendees were asked how the statement ‘approaching or lusting after men when you have wives’ could be read if the assumption that same-sex attraction or sexual acts are sinful are not taken for granted? It required them to locate the ‘problem’ in something *other* than homosexuality in general. The attendees employed the reason-based hermeneutical tools of ‘thematic-holism’ where they compared the various verses referring to homosexuality with a ‘comprehensive contextualisation’ of the meaning of the Qur’ānic Arabic. The attendees were able to come up with several alternative readings of what the object of condemnation could be: infidelity, violence, humiliation, disobedience, lack of faith, excessive unmoderated sexuality, lack of consent/rape, abuse, sex outside a committed relationship, public sex, sex without love/respect, etc. The questions probed the issue of violence. For instance, Mahmud’s mother spoke:

> My husband and I have had discussions about this where in many societies, like the one being mentioned here, raping young men, even children, and using sex as a form of domination, violence, harassment may be considered deviant but is still tolerated as long as the man is married to a woman. But if you are in a gay relationship that is based on mutual love and support, it is not ok. So, there is that.’

Mahmud: ‘Sexual violence, raping men, is used even today by armies. It would be a stretch to say that is about sexual orientation.’

Shaykh:

> It appears that as a society we are more appalled by two people who are in love with each other if they are of the same sex than with sexual violence and abuse. So back to the verses even if *zauj* is not gender neutral but about wives then the verse is addressing these people who are about to commit the acts of sexual violence. It is reminding them that you are married people! We are being given this extra information deliberately that these people were married, they were committing a crime, this is not about their sexual orientation.

6.1.3 The 'Spiritual' Hermeneutical Approach

Additionally, the group did not engage with this topic from a purely textual and Intellectual approach but also discussed it from relational, communal, embodied, and affective angles, i.e., the Spiritual approach. The psychological anguish of the questioner underscores this as Mother A asked: 'We are all here because members of our family are LGBT. I have two questions. Where does my child fit? Can she still be a Muslim? And where do I fit? Because I am at a point where if Islam doesn't accept it [her sexual orientation], I do not want to be a Muslim anymore. I have been a Muslim for 30 years and I am questioning that!'

Her voice faltered as she asked this question and she started crying. The woman next to her placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Mahmud's mother responded:

> I understand how you feel. I had the same thing... I'm not an Islamic scholar but I had the same questions. I want my son to be a practising Muslim too. You know what, my heart says that Allah has made my son like this. It is not a choice. I don't believe that any God who has deemed this on my child will not accept him, or would not accept me for loving and accepting my child. So, for me I am not looking for any answers from anyone or from any text. It is my personal belief that I am going to stick with no matter what any text says. And if Allah holds me to account when I meet Him then I will be held to account! Because if something or someone says to me that your child, if he is gay, is wrong, and you are wrong to have him as your child and you should reject him, I can't do that! Because I can't do that, I will not look for any other answers. So, for me this is how I have reconciled this question for myself. This is exactly what my husband had said to me. I wasn't at that point yet but that was the point he had already reached. The fear is always what will our community, other people say, and we will be the hot topic for a while and then they will move on, but the damage I could do to my kid in the process is irreparable.

In this highly emotive response, Mahmud's mother expressed the Spiritual hermeneutical approach towards the Islamic Revelation that claims that Divine Truths and Meaning can also be accessed *outside* the Text of the Revelation within, what Shahab Ahmed labels, the

Pre-Text of the Revelation. The way Mahmud's mother approached Islamic meaning-making for herself on this topic was an embodied affective hermeneutical engagement with The Pre-Text of Revelation. For her the safest guide to knowing Divine Truth was through paying attention to what decisions, beliefs, and behaviours aligned with promoting her experiences of love and connection with her son, and through processing embodied moral feelings of guilt, fear, and shame. She prioritised this Islamic meaning-making through the Pre-Text of Revelation as she considered it hierarchically higher as a hermeneutical tool for her ethical self-formation as a Muslim.

Mother A and some other attendees had tears in their eyes and nodded in agreement as Mahmud' mother described her process of finding her Islamic answer to her son's sexual orientation. Thereafter, Mother A elaborated that she is not as concerned about the impact of her daughter's relationship and sexuality on their belongingness in the Muslim community, but she was terrified of condoning anything that would remove her daughter from the fold of Islam and thereby from Allah.

Shaykh: 'That is why I brought Qur'ānic verses because trained theologians cannot say that someone who is gay cannot be Muslim.'

Mother A: 'But they do!'

Shaykh responded:

> I am talking about experts in theology. They may give long lectures attacking it as a sin, but they can't say you can't be a Muslim. The theologians may say it in ways that make people depressed if they are gay as it makes them think in Islamic theology it is wrong to be gay, so they can't be Muslims. But it is rubbish. We need to empower people, so they know what the theology is. It seems contemporary Muslim society is obsessed with this topic, but this is not part of Muslim articles of faith or *'aqīdah*. It falls under the category called *muʿāmalāt* [not

> related to ritual or articles of faith but social relations and transactions]. Theologians can't claim someone isn't Muslim if they aren't violating *'aqīdah*. So, the key theological question here is: How can a just God make someone gay and then punish them for it?

Others murmur in agreement. The Shaykh goes on: 'That's the question we need to ask any theologian who says they should be punished and then the usual response is: No, they weren't created this way; it is a lifestyle. But the Qur'ān says God is just so we must think more about the experiences of LGBT people themselves rather than assume what it is.'

Mother A responded:

> I think this experience has connected me more to my faith and Allah because I am approaching it through a sense of freedom and love rather than fear. This questions everything at such a level. That is the thing about fear-based religion and how I used to think about Islam that it closed me from my heart. It has freed me from what I thought were rigid barriers and boundaries. I can see I can be Muslim if I love my child. When I feel my heart and my love for my child it opens my love for my Creator Allah as well. It is a real journey for us when we overcome our fears. I was scared if she will not be Muslim rather than about sexuality even.

Shaykh added:

> That is the problem with cultural prejudices where people are excluded from the fold of Islam for being in a relationship with a person of the same gender but there is widespread consensus among Muslim scholars and lay Muslims that many grievous crimes and sins do not remove a person from the fold of Islam. They are still Muslim for them, but they draw the line here?

The focus of this conversation was primarily on the emotions of fear and love as guides to Islamic meaning-making whereby not only is the person making themselves into a Muslim but, concurrently, re-making Islam as well, i.e., they are adding to the Con-Text of the Revelation. These parents were fearful of harm and suffering befalling their children and themselves, while their love and care for them drove them to seek answers on how to protect,

guide, and nurture them. Part of the concern was about social belonging and fears of rejection, ridicule, shame, loneliness, and the loss of community and religious identity for themselves and their queer loved ones. While a larger, and often more emotionally intense, concern was related to spiritual harm. Attendees spoke about their fear of disobeying Allah, the consequences of their actions in the hereafter, as one attendee described as 'a sense of fear and shame about being answerable to Allah as a parent for 'failing' to bring my daughter to the "straight path"—*aṣ-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*—that I recite in prayers every day'.

Through difficult and vulnerable conversations, the attendees constructed queer-affirming interpretations of Islamic textual sources through both the Intellectual as well as Spiritual hermeneutical approaches. Furthermore, since they engaged in this Islamic meaning-making for the Self within a group setting they also constructed a 'community of interpretation' where they could have social support and belonging with other similar Muslims who validate their projects of ethical self-formation. Khaled Abou El-Fadl uses the term 'community of interpretation' to refer to different communities that can develop around *ways* of reading scriptures (2001: 104). In this case a commitment to textual polysemy and personal *ijtihād* does not mean unrestricted interpretational relativism because a community imposes rules, norms, values, tools, and assumptions that narrow down alternative readings to those that can be considered 'contextually legitimated'.

El-Fadl argues that following the ethical and reason-based principles laid down in the Qur'ān inevitably leads to evolving and multiple communities of interpretations, but this does not condemn the believers to either indeterminacy or authoritarianism. He views authoritarianism as the 'act of "locking" or captivating the Will of the Divine, or the will of the text, into a specific determination, and then presenting this determination as inevitable,

final, and conclusive' (2001: 107). Rather than viewing this process of the construction of an Islamic discursive tradition as necessarily aimed at creating an 'orthodoxy' or concerned with prescriptive discourses (Asad 1986), it can be viewed as a situated exploratory discourse enabling personally meaningful, relative, and empowering practices of ethical self-formation.

6.1.4.Being Islamically Queer: 'How Can My Gay Son Live in an Islamic Way?'

The second major theme that the attendees were eager to discuss with each other, the organisers, and the Shaykh is best expressed by a question Mother B asked the group. After a long discussion on whether LGBTQIA+ identities, sexuality, and relationships were Islamic—*ḥalāl* or *ḥarām*—or not, there was a consensus that given the verses and *ḥadīth* they had looked at it could be accepted that being queer was not a sin in Islam. Thereafter, Mother B stated that if we accept the conclusion that sexual orientation and identities emerging from them, as well as from varying gender identities, are affirmed within Islam then 'what are the rules that apply to gay Muslims? Are they the same that apply to heterosexual Muslims?'.

Hence, the discussion moved away from the acceptability of queer sexual orientation and gender identities and towards sexual and relational *behaviours*. This was a question about finding *how*—rather than if—queer Muslims fit into the framework of Islamic norms on sexual, marital, familial, and gendered relations? For instance, Mother A shared:

> Well, I spoke to a feminist Islamic scholar about this a few years ago, and she had told me that it not the orientation that is the problem because they said it's like you are born with a disability, like without limbs. So, the issue is actions and it is a test by Allah, and people born like that must remain celibate and that's how it is. But the same scholar has now changed her view and says they should be married. So, I find that it is very interesting that a scholar with so much knowledge can have their own journey on this issue.

Mother B: 'I'm asking if the same rules apply to LGBT couples as heterosexual couples in Islam then? Do they have to get married first for sex to be *ḥalāl*?'

Shaykh:' It depends on who you ask.'

Mother B: 'I'm asking you.'

Shaykh: 'I am saying that issues of marriage are culturally decided upon so it depends on the context and how to meet people's needs.'

Mother B: 'So, are you saying that it is permissible to have sex before marriage if a culture considers that to be so? This is really blowing my mind!...Does *anything* go?'

Mahmud interjected:

> I think it is about the larger story about relationships, sex, and power we are getting to. One story that the Shaykh has described includes how sex was understood as procreative, but also teenagers getting married, and men having sex with slaves was part of the package. That story eliminates LGBT people. Once we accept them as part of the Muslim community then that means we go back to figure out the larger story and questions about marriage, sex, and power--including reconsidering the ethics of sex before marriage. We reconsider them in a new light.

Shaykh elaborated:

> I think this brings us to what I was saying that the *fiqh* is a social construct. A human invention and that is good news if we understand that we are free to wonder and construct it according to what promotes spiritual wellbeing. But if we take it to be 'this is Islam' then we take it as revelation and fixed. So, to answer your question we must begin with acknowledging this is human constructed knowledge, and you have to then ask yourself whether you want to subscribe to that and know what your principles and beliefs are for making that decision. I will give you an example: the same *fiqh* that says marriage is between a man and a wife also says that slavery is allowed. So, you have to ask yourself do you want to go with that as well?

There was a discussion on different aspects of what it would mean if LGBTQIA+ Muslims are fully integrated within an Islamic community. What kinds of relationships would be possible? What sexual acts were *ḥalāl* ? How can we know if a marriage would be Islamically legal or not? Do the same rules for marriage and divorce apply for queer couples? What would that mean in practise? This kind of questioning and discussion is opened because of the groundwork on accepting that queer Muslim identities, sexualities, and relationships can be 'Islamic'. Given that step, a whole gamut of questions that relate to norms and behaviours emerged, and the group was engaged in a kind of negotiation and construction of new norms around where and how to regulate queer sexualities in ways they considered compatible with Islam.

Fatima: 'If the two men are married and have a *nikāḥ* [Islamic marriage contract] then it would be in the same model of intimacy as for heterosexuals.'

Mother A: 'Is that allowed in Islam?'

Fatima: 'The IMI performs *nikāḥ* for same-sex couples!'

Mother B: 'How is that possible within Islam?'

Fatima answered:

> It is a contract between two people that involves commitments to each other and contracts happen all the time. Returning to companionship, I believe that we are all returning to the source, Allah, when we truly connect and love each other and through our relationships and love and family and commitment to each other we are part of the process of returning to the Beloved.

There were varied opinions with some attendees considering celibacy as the correct option, while most said that sexual and companionship needs for their queer family members

could, in fact, be met within an Islamic framework. There was no consensus on what this framework would or should look like but there was a lively discussion on different options. Some attendees stated that this was something that their queer loved ones had to construct and grapple with themselves and, in fact, many of them were already in relationships, including marriages that were blessed and officiated by one of the *imāms* at the IMI.

6.2. CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the diverse ways in which Progressive Muslims deal with internal disquiet, soul-searching and maladjustment caused by using hermeneutical tools, such as the reinterpretation of the foundational Islamic texts, to affirm and accommodate problematic gender and sexual orientations in the self or the family. Both ways of dealing with reality, external or internal, aspire to finding ways of being which balance authenticity of the self with the quotidian demands of the world around one.

7. Progressive Muslims and the State: The Quilliam Approach

At the onset of my research project, I contacted various groups that broadly share the epistemological, hermeneutical, and theological concepts, tools, beliefs, and assumptions that I have identified as constituting the discourse and practice of 'progressive Muslims'. From the outset I realised that shared religious discourses and practices do not result in shared politics or religious subjectivities, as my interlocutors were keen to highlight. This is particularly relevant when exploring the question of how progressive Muslims relate to discourses and practices of governmentality and 'the state'.

Both within academic and public discourse there are widely divergent views regarding the relationship of progressive Muslim discourses and practices with state practices. At one end of the spectrum, some view progressive Muslims as willing or gullible participants in imperialistic projects emanating from Western states or figures that reinforce secular power (Fadil 2011; Fernando 2009; Mas 2006); at the other end, they are seen as the source of Muslim liberation and a site of resistance to both secular and religious oppressions (El-Tayeb 2012; Siraj 2016; Thompson 2020b).

During fieldwork there were numerous events, discussions, and practices organised under the 'progressive Muslim' banner that on the surface looked remarkably similar but on deeper inspection revealed different values and agenda. Moving away from just the 'content'—or the 'what' questions—of the discourses towards the context of the discourses and, hence, the motivations, intentions, goals, and politics—the 'how' and 'why' questions—provided a clearer understanding of what those progressive Muslim discourses and practices enacted in action.

I will begin by exploring the socio-political context shaped by counterterrorism legislation, practices, and discourses in the UK that different progressive Muslim social actors—community groups, organisations, and individuals—engage with in different ways depending on their positionality and motivations. Therefore, in this chapter and the next one I aim to provide case studies of varying approaches of progressive Muslim discourses and practices towards the state. Utilising fieldwork data, I seek to demonstrate that the type of relationship between progressive Muslims and state policies varies in ways that reflect the motivations and positionality of diverse actors in their social context. Therefore, I aim to counter any claim that there is a universal or essential relation dynamic between progressive Muslim discourses and the discourses and practices emanating from the state.

7.1. QUILLIAM

Due to the global political climate, with increasing Islamist movements and focus on militant Islam, most Muslim organisations in Britain address the issues related to militancy and extremism in some form. These issues are most often specifically associated with progressive Muslim groups by the state and media, as they are seen as natural allies against Islamism. Working with this presumption, the British government has attempted to work with *imāms* (Islamic religious leaders) and organisations that aim to challenge the religious narratives of Islamist and militant organisations, but with mixed results. Quilliam was the most prominent civil society organisation that the British state initially partnered with to offer a Muslim counter-narrative to Islamism.

Quilliam was founded in 2008 and was dissolved in 2021. It described itself as the first ever think-tank that focuses on understanding and counteracting extremist narratives, specifically of the Islamist type. It derived its name from William Henry Quilliam (1856-

1932), born a Methodist, who converted to Islam after recuperating from an illness in Morocco in 1887. He changed his first name to Abdullah and is known as Sheikh Abdullah by his followers. In the same year he bought buildings with a donation from Nasrullah Khan, the crown prince of Afghanistan, and established the Liverpool Muslim Institute. This, incidentally, was the first mosque in Britain (Geaves 2009).

It was this inspiring pioneer who was evoked by Maajid Nawaz, Ed Husain and Rashad Zaman, all three previously members of an Islamist Muslim organisation called Hizb-ut-Tahrir, who eventually changed their beliefs and decided to set up Quilliam. Maajid Nawaz revealed in his autobiography that he was subjected to racism and Islamophobia as a British Muslim of Pakistani descent in Essex and found that his religious identity was a resource he could use to form a community and gain an ideology to counter feelings of marginalization and denigration (Nawaz 2012). He became particularly interested in international politics after the Srebrenica massacre of Bosnian Muslims. His activism within Hizb-ut-Tahrir led him to Egypt where he was eventually arrested and imprisoned. His personal journey towards progressive Islam began after interactions with case workers and lawyers from Amnesty International who took up his cause on grounds of human rights and helped him eventually get released back to Britain. He set up Quilliam thereafter while he was a student at the London School of Economics with his other two friends, also from the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, in London in 2008 (Nawaz 2012).

The Quilliam approached ‘progressive Islam’ as an important tool within a broader ‘counter-ideology’ programme that could be applied in a top-down approach by the state to protect ‘the public’ from a threatening ‘Other’. Progressive Islam was primarily framed as being less about the self and more about ‘winning the hearts and minds of Muslims’ who

could otherwise potentially be swayed by extremist ideologies and values. On the other hand, the IMI's approach to 'progressive Islam' was more bottom-up and self-directed. Religious discourse and practice were conceived primarily as personal and communal resources that were meaningful, empowering, and liberating for the self. Here, violence was not conceived as emanating from individuals and organisations considered external to the moral order or the social contract that binds 'us' but as emanating from precisely the centre of the 'public culture and order'.

As discussed earlier, previous work in the Anthropology of Islam has viewed progressive Muslim discourses, practices, activists, and communities primarily from a lens of their 'productive' role within Western imperialistic foreign policy and racializing domestic policies (Fadil 2011; Fernando 2009; Puar 2017). For instance, Saba Mahmood compared the US 'Muslim World Out-reach' project that was launched in 2003 with the agenda of promoting a so-called moderate and progressive Islam globally with the writings of prominent progressive Muslim theologians, activists, and academics to demonstrate 'a common set of views about the kind of text the Qur'ān is and the techniques by which it is to be interpreted' (Mahmood 2006a: 337). She asserted that this convergence in hermeneutical approaches and beliefs makes progressive Muslim reformers 'a powerful partner' to the U.S. State Department's imperialistic and Islamophobic goals (Mahmood 2006a: 344).

While Mahmood acknowledged that the 'motives and intentions' of progressive Muslims are different from those of the U.S. state, and are often publicly and vocally opposed to them, she argued that since they 'share a set of epistemological and conceptual truths' they ultimately promote 'liberal secularism'. She conceptualised 'liberal secularism' as 'a strategy of political rule' that exercises 'the state's sovereign power to regulate religious

subjectivities, practices, and forms of life' (Mahmood 2008: 463–464). Hence, she linked progressive Muslim discourses and practices as part of the larger project of 'secularism' meant to produce 'a concomitant religious subject that animates various secular discourses, including juridical, cultural, ethical, and political ones' (2008: 462).

Mahmood elaborated that her critique and concern about this 'secular vision' primarily rests on the 'fear that it is premised on a propensity to violence' that is often directed towards Muslims (Mahmood 2006a: 347, 2009). Specifically, she pointed to two issues with 'liberal secularism': One, that it involves an inequality of power where the state retains exclusive power to regulate, reshape, and transform religion, religious subjectivities, and religious communities but not the obverse (2006a: 327). Secondly, secularism is inherently biased not just because it 'privileges majoritarian religious norms' but because it authorises only certain forms of religious subjectivity 'even if this requires the use of violence' (Mahmood 2006a: 328).

My research suggests that to understand the character and function of Muslim discourses and practices that are classified as 'progressive' we have to understand the context within which they operate, as they are not homogeneous or necessarily 'compliant with liberal political rule' (Mahmood 2006a: 328). I would argue that the character and political 'ends' of these religious discourses and practices are variable and are best understood within their specific contexts rather than as universal social phenomena. In the next section I will elaborate on the socio-political context within which the various political approaches of progressive Muslims can be mapped out.

7.2. SECURITY AND SECURITISATION: THE CONTEXT OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS

To place this discussion in a larger context, it is useful to first recognise that the public sense of the risk of being harmed by violent acts labelled 'Islamist', remains highly exaggerated relative to the actual risk (Fidas 2008; Mueller & Stewart 2021). This sense of threat is constantly heightened by the nature of news media, which is more likely to highlight threatening, exceptional, and violent events, thereby skewing people's estimation of the relative frequency and risk that terrorism poses to the public. Additionally, the way news media frames terrorist events reflects Islamophobic biases in terms of both the extent of the threat of Islamist violence as well as the nature of the perpetrators (Kabir et al. 2018; Mansoor August 20202; Rubaltelli et al. 2020). Furthermore, government messages about the 'Terrorist Threat Level' released to the public also create a sense of living under a state of siege. The UK government has been releasing 'threat levels' updates with the public since 2006, which have usually been designated 'severe' or 'substantial' and occasionally 'critical'.

This socio-political environment results in a 'state of permanent exception' where individual rights, particularly of Muslim citizens, are superseded because the threat and fear of Islamist terrorist attacks is used to justify such enhanced state intervention (Bonino 2013: 389). It is often argued, for instance by the Crown Prosecution Service, that terrorism crimes are 'distinct from other types of crime' as they are 'ideological' and unlike 'typical criminal motivations', hence the usual norms and practices used for policing and the operation of the criminal justice system can be circumvented (CPS n.d.). Any policing and criminal justice procedure that is categorised as terrorism-related can utilise stronger and more intrusive

investigation powers, extended pre-charge detention, secret evidence for charges and trials, closed trials, inadequate legal aid and representation for the defendant, longer sentences, harsher restrictions in jails, and intrusive and restrictive post-release surveillance and management. Furthermore, the panoply of civil restrictions and surveillance meant to be preventative creates 'a parallel criminal justice system' that currently mainly impacts Muslims (Blakeley et al. 2019: 30). The erosion of procedures meant to protect individuals from state violence is legitimised as 'exceptional' measures for 'national security' but are increasingly becoming 'ordinary' through their incorporation into normal criminal justice practice (Zedner 2014: 116).

7.3. THE UK COUNTERTERRORISM FRAMEWORK

Since 2000 there has been a spate of new legislation related to counterterrorism in the UK with the 'Terrorism Act 2000' being the primary legislation coming into force on 19 February 2001. Terrorism is defined in Section 1 of the Act as the use or threat of violence against a person or property that endangers the health and safety of the public, or a person's life, or that disrupts an electronic system in order to advance a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause (Terrorism Act 2000 2000).

The UK counter-terrorism legislation has also created several 'precursor' offences that are more anticipatory and preventative rather than involving any act of terrorism or direct participation in terrorist organising. For instance, Section 58 of the Act includes 'preparatory' acts for terrorism which include collection, possession, or viewing of information 'of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism'. Referring to the nature of these 'precursor offences' the UK's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation wrote in his 2022 annual report: 'Probably no other

offence confers such a degree of discretion on CT Police and prosecutors because so little needs to be proven' (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation & Hall 2022: 90). He cited the latest statistics to demonstrate that section 58 was the most frequently applied principal charge and conviction related to terrorism, and includes viewing or possessing widely available documents online (2022: 93–94).

The legislation also criminalises expression of views or publishing of statements that can be interpreted as 'encouraging or glorifying terrorism,' including promoting 'hate', which have come to be known as 'glorification' offences (Home Office 2011b: 26). This definition of terrorism has a problematic 'breadth and vagueness' that potentially criminalises not just violent acts but ideas, views, expressions, and texts in ways that 'risks creating, what is, in effect, a thought crime' (Zedner 2014: 114). For instance, Samina Malik, 24, was convicted under section 58 after she wrote poems that seemed to celebrate acts of terrorist violence, which led to a court of appeal ruling that writing, reading, viewing material related to terrorism could *not* be an offense unless it provided 'practical assistance' (Glendinning 2008).

Despite this change in the scope of this legislation these measures are broad and flexible enough to include within their purview a range of political views and movements that do not directly relate to terrorism or support for terrorist organisations. For instance, Algerian refugees involved in resistance efforts against Algerian government massacres in the 1990s and early 2000s were charged under the Terrorism Act since the legislation includes a list of 'proscribed organisations' that include organisations and movements that play complex roles in different national contexts (Fekete 2001; Hodge Jones & Allen 2021). Furthermore, several of my interlocutors expressed that they felt that their 'critical approach'

to the new ‘national security’ approach could potentially tangle them within the ever-expanding counterterrorism paradigm. There was a perception that the framework of these security legislations is aimed at stifling debate, protest, and activism on a broad spectrum of critical political movements. As one woman at the IMI noted, ‘Our society is terrorising entire groups of people to prevent terrorism. In this environment of fear any type of activism that wants all forms of terror and violence to end can easily be shut down as another security threat.’

Another part of the new counterterrorism security apparatus that was frequently referred to as example of an unjust and racialised expansion of state violence was the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs). TPIMs were passed as law in 2011 to prevent terrorism outside the criminal justice apparatus. These ‘civil measures’ severely limit the ordinary freedoms and rights of an individual who is suspected of terrorist activity, usually based on secret intelligence, without going through the usual criminal prosecution route. TPIMs include requiring relocation, police reporting, electronic monitoring tag, limits and freeze on financial services and resources, ban on holding travel documents, drug testing, and monitoring of electronic device usage. They also impinge on the rights of family members or other people resident in the subject’s residence, for instance by applying restrictions related to electronic communication devices and movements on them as well. The maximum length of TPIMs used to be two years without a renewal but with the Counter-terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021 it can be up to five years and renewed indefinitely. Furthermore, this new legislation lowered the standard of proof that is needed from an assessment of the ‘balance of probabilities’ to ‘reasonable grounds’. One of the criticisms on these ‘anticipatory,’ pre-crime, civil measures that the government’s reviewer

of this legislation wrote about in his report was: ‘Their greatest drawback is that morally culpable behaviour is addressed outside the criminal process and subject to closed procedures from which the TPIM subject is excluded’ (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation & Hall 2022: 97).

Concerningly, there is also evidence that several individuals arrested and prosecuted under ‘precursor offenses’ involving either ‘preparatory’ crimes, like viewing certain websites, or ‘glorification’ crimes, involving expressing extremist views, are diagnosed with, or appear to have, mental health conditions (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation & Hall 2022: 95). Specifically, some TPIM subjects have been diagnosed with, or appear to have, a range of psychological or neuro-divergent conditions (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation & Hall 2022: 105). This shifts the approach towards certain vulnerable individuals from a psycho-social approach based on the ‘duty of care’ that aims to promote their wellbeing and social integration towards a ‘security’ and ‘crime’ approach that views them as social threats to be dealt through tools of containment and punishment. This approach not only fails to resolve the social and personal conditions that sustain violent ideologies and behaviours but maintains and worsens them (Manzoor-Khan 2022).

Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is another crucial counterterrorism power that impacted the political and religious discourses and practices of my interlocutors. It allows police officers to stop, question, and examine people at ports and borders(2000). The Act also allows officers to do so without needing ‘reasonable suspicion,’ which in practice translates to officers engaging in ethnic profiling. This has resulted in BAME communities being repeatedly and disproportionally stopped for questioning, searches, and detentions that are experienced as unfair, insulting, and intrusive (Lewis & Marsden 2020). Furthermore, it

allows officers to access personal electronic devices and make a copy of the data on these devices. This data can be retained indefinitely and potentially also used to construct a bank of intelligence data. In addition to Section 7, the threat of terrorism is also used to justify increasing data collection and surveillance at borders including biometrics like fingerprints and DNA profiles and, more recently, facial recognition technologies. The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has raised a concern that the power to download and retain digital data from individuals without any suspicion and 'for so long as necessary' is being practised without any clear information on how the data will be managed, reviewed, retained, or deleted (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation & Hall 2022: 79). Furthermore, new powers under Schedule 3 of the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 further expand these powers allowing state officials to access privileged legal and journalistic material (2022: 82).

Another state power that plays a large role in the motivations and experiences of my interlocutors relate to policing, specifically the power to 'stop and search'. For instance, Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 allowed authorities to 'stop and search' individuals in any location without needing any reasonable suspicion. A report released by the Human Rights Watch analysed 450,000 stop and searches under Section 44 between April 2007 and April 2009 and found that Black and South Asian people were stopped more frequently than white people, and certain Muslim-majority areas in London were targeted more intensely (Ward & Human Rights Watch 2010). Data from the stop and searches demonstrated that they did not result in any useful intelligence or prosecution related to terrorism, while they severely damaged community relations and undermined the sense of safety and trust Muslim citizens felt in relation to the police and the British state in general (2010: 57). The report had

called for the repeal of Section 44 as concluded it ‘compromises the UK’s human rights obligations and is counterproductive’ (2010: 3). This practice of ‘stop and search’ without reasonable suspicion was ruled illegal by the European Court of Human Rights and was finally scrapped by the UK government through the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 although the practice continues under other legislative frameworks.

Overall, the UK counter-terrorism legislation since 2001 has resulted in the construction of the Muslim community as a ‘suspect community’ in the national discourse, which follows a similar response to political violence on the part of the IRA when Irish people were constructed as ‘suspect’ (Hickman et al. 2012). While in the case of the Irish this operated primarily at the ‘communicative interactional level,’ for many Muslims it operates at a ‘prima facie level’ based on distinctive body markers and signs of ‘Muslimness’ (skin colour, beard, the hijab) (Bonino 2013: 391). Visible markers of Muslimness increase the likelihood of a person experiencing employment discrimination, hate crimes, aversive interactions with police and airport officials, and perceptions of marginalisation (Bonino 2015; Hopkins 2004). This has resulted in a worsening rather than an amelioration of grievances among the Muslim communities, due to increasing demonisation, discrimination, and violence experienced from different sectors of British society, including the state, media, and the public (Choudhury & Fenwick 2011).

7.3.1. Prevent: The UK Counter-Extremism Framework

Prevent is part of the UK government’s counterterrorism strategy named ‘Contest,’ which includes four parts and aims to ‘reduce the risk to the UK and its citizens and interests overseas from terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence’

(Home Office 2018). The four components of the strategy—according to the 2018 update of the policy—are:

1. Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks;
2. Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism;
3. Protect: to strengthen our protection against terrorist attacks; and
4. Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack.

The Prevent strategy was declassified, revised, and published in 2011 and was to be led by the Office for Security and Counter-terrorism (OSCT) within the Home Office (Home Office 2011b). The Prevent strategy was introduced in the context of the then Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Munich speech' where he declared that it was time for an 'active, muscular liberalism' to confront extremism in Muslim communities in Europe as the 'hands-off tolerance' towards these communities had led 'some young Muslims' to become radicalized and engage in terrorism (Cameron 2011). In the 2011 revised Prevent strategy the government admitted that mistakes were made in the way Prevent was delivered earlier, especially with the tying of Prevent with 'integration' projects. The new strategy claimed it 'will not securitise its integration strategy' (Home Office 2011b: 6). There are three objectives of the Prevent strategy:

1- Counter-ideology: Challenging 'extremism' through the promotion of 'Fundamental British Values (FBV)'. Prevent strategy defines 'extremism' as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (2011b: 107). The strategy advocates 'being confident in our own values--the values of democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights

of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind. Challenge must be accompanied by advocacy of the very systems and values which terrorists in this country and elsewhere set out to destroy' (2011b: 44).

2- Referrals: This involves referrals of people who are considered 'vulnerable' to radicalisation to the Channel programme, which is a multi-agency programme that aims to provide interventions that aim to redirect these individuals from becoming terrorists. The types of intervention can include: counselling; 'faith guidance'; civic engagement; working with support networks; employment and educational support.(2011b: 58).

3- Recruiting 'key sectors': This involves enlisting various sectors of society to conduct counter-extremism work, like conducting Prevent trainings and requiring identifying and reporting 'vulnerable' people. The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced this work as a legal requirement—the 'Prevent duty'—for the public sector. Priority 'sectors' include local authorities, educational institutions, the healthcare sector including the NHS, criminal justice institutions like prisons and probation services, police, and charities that accept public funding (Home Office 2021).

The Channel programme aims to provide practical help and counselling for individuals who have been flagged as 'vulnerable' to being drawn into terrorism. The policy states that referrals can come from individuals or partner organisations or services, like social services, GPs, police, teachers, and local community organisations. The referrals initially go either to the police or to a supporting partner organisation and then are forwarded to the Channel programme. The referrals are assessed by a multi-agency panel chaired by the local authority

together with the Channel coordinator and other relevant statutory partners. Most of the referrals are not pursued, but a few may lead to the individual being contacted, assessed, and then offered support. The policy states that the Channel programme can provide the following support to people who are referred to it, although they are not limited to just these options: mentoring; diversionary activities such as sports; and support with education, employment, or housing. (Home Office News Team 2021).

The Channel programme has been a subject of intense criticism due to the vague nature of identifying and assessing individuals who are 'at risk' of being drawn into terrorism. The government provides 'signs for spotting' if someone is vulnerable to radicalisation to help people and organisations in making referrals to the Channel programme. These signs to look out for include: susceptibility to indoctrination; feeling under threat; feelings of grievance and injustice; being at a transitional time of life; being influenced or controlled by a group; involvement of one's social networks in extremism; need for identity, meaning, and belonging; mental health issues, a desire for status; opportunistic involvement; a desire for excitement and adventure; a desire to dominate and control others; and a desire for political, social, or moral change. These signs for spotting individuals who may 'benefit' from the Channel programme have been criticised for being vague and biased against young, working-class, Muslim men who are visibly religious.

7.4. QUILLIAM'S CONTROVERSIAL ASSOCIATIONS

In the eyes of many Muslims, and not just progressive ones, Quilliam, however, became controversial when it became associated in their minds with policies, ideas, and groups which they regarded as harmful for them. For instance, they started questioning it when it began to help the government run an anti-radicalisation programme, called 'Prevent'. The

Prevent policy has become a deeply polarising issue within British Muslim communities, as we shall discuss in the next chapter. Furthermore, Quilliam was in the news following a confidential report they sent to the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT), on 14 June 2010. This report, which was leaked to the press by a civil servant, argued that the government counter-terrorism policy should include monitoring and challenging the narratives of organisations that merely express radical beliefs without actually carrying out any violent or illegal acts (Gardham 2010). They advocated legal tolerance for these organisations coupled with civic intolerance and a sustained policy of countering their narratives and influence. The organisations that were included in this list labelled it as a 'McCarthyite' list that stigmatised them and their work and beliefs.

Yet another major controversy that dogged Quilliam was their association with the notorious White supremacist, Tommy Robinson. Robinson had helped to establish the far-right organisation English Defence League which he eventually defected from in 2013. This defection was officially announced to the media in a press conference organized by Quilliam on 8 October 2013. Robinson later claimed that he was paid by Quilliam to take credit for leaving the EDL when he had made the decision independently for other reasons. He returned to anti-Islam activism when he founded the Pegida organisation of the UK in 2015, which was an offshoot of the German Pegida (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendland or, in English, Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident). Pegida declared itself opposed to Muslim immigration, Shari'a courts, the covering of the face by a veil practised by some Muslim women and the construction of more mosques (at least for a certain period of time) (Gutteridge 2016). As some of this criticism is essentially about the state, its powers and the relationship of organisations with the state, it will be taken

up subsequently (chapter 8) when I explore the debates on Prevent and the UK state's counter-radicalisation policy within and between progressive Muslim organisations.

7.5. QUILLIAM AND THE PREVENT EXPERIMENT

The Quilliam gala was a celebration of the UK government's counterterrorism approach with a focus on the utility and effectiveness of the Prevent policy. Quilliam's role in promoting counter-extremism narratives was highlighted by different speakers. Different aspects of Quilliam's work were described to the audience, like their publications, media interactions, art exhibitions, university free speech and debate societies, and their one-on-one counselling with individuals who were flagged as being vulnerable to radicalisation. There were testimonials from individuals who described how they had become radicalised but through mentorship with experts at Quilliam they were able to reframe their worldview. Within the narrative presented at the event, the state was viewed as an institution that protects the rights, freedoms, and safety of all citizens from those who hold extreme views and beliefs. These 'radicalised' individuals and groups were conceptualised as not only not sharing the Fundamental British Values espoused by the 'rest of us,' but also the motivations for their views and actions—irrationality, hate, anger, and jealousy—were unlike those held by the 'rest of us'. Hence, the threat of extremism was essentially constructed as a dysfunction that was external or alien to the 'us' who were represented by the British state and 'normal' British people.

While I was discussing Prevent with some employees at Quilliam, one of the board members, Umer, stated that he thinks that the British counter-extremism programme is 'one of the best in the world'. He recounted his own background as someone who used to be an active member of a radical Islamist group in the UK, which he only left after he was arrested

in a foreign country and was released through the work of Amnesty International. This changed his political ideology, and he became convinced of the importance of counter-radicalisation work. He stated that his background makes him acutely aware that Islamist groups can hold considerable legitimacy and influence among young Muslim men who feel disenfranchised and are angry at the status quo. He contended that counter-extremist Islamic discourses were crucial and effective in discounting the legitimacy and appeal of both violent as well as non-violent extremist or hateful ideologies.

He praised Prevent for prioritising organisations like Quilliam that produce such counter-extremist religious narratives because he believed this provided resources to change the mindset of the people who were influenced by Islamist ideologies. For instance, one of Quilliam's reports laid out a series of theological and juristic arguments countering Islamist interpretations (Al-Ansari & Hasan 2018). This report specifically highlighted ten religious arguments employed by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq & Levant) to justify their war and terrorism tactics and then provided a counter argument for each of them that was also based on Islamic theological and juristic sources and reasoning. In addition to the Islamic theological and juristic discourses that Quilliam produced, the organisation also offered other 'deradicalization services,' like providing religious mentoring and counselling to individuals who had been flagged as being vulnerable to recruitment to terrorist organisations and causes.

During my fieldwork with Quilliam, I was informed by the people working there that although they were not receiving any government funding at that point, they were not averse to it in principle. For instance, Umer stated that their organisation gets criticised by the left, the right, Islamists, and White supremacists because they had received funding from the

British state at an earlier point, but he stated this was only a convincing criticism because counter-extremist work was not valued. Umer lamented that Islamists in Britain, together with the political left, had successfully 'convinced' a large proportion of the population, especially within British Muslim communities, to distrust the Prevent programme by 'falsely presenting it as a form of religious discrimination and an attempt to change Islam'.

Hence, there were repeated efforts at encouragements made by the senior management to other employees and volunteers at Quilliam to increase the organisation's visibility and participation in public discourses because it was considered crucial for increasing the legitimacy of the organisation. Umer stated, 'The public has to be educated on the value of this work'. Similarly, he also asserted that Quilliam should not be shamed for trying to raise funds after terrorist attacks, as it did after the 2017 Manchester terrorist attack at Ariana Grande's concert, because that is only a problem if people think that counter-extremism work is not valuable. He posed the question, 'If there is a racist attack then anti-racism organisations would be supported and the same thing for natural disaster relief organisations, so why is our fund raising after a terrorist attack any different?' He proudly stated that there had been an increase in the number of people subscribing to their newsletter and donating to them after the 2017 terrorist attacks in London and Manchester.

Therefore, people I spoke to at Quilliam described their work as primarily about shifting public opinion through participating in public conversations and debates with the aim of making people take the threat posed by extremist ideologies and terrorism more seriously. Additionally, Umer elaborated that Quilliam is well placed to do this work of shaping public opinion because they believe that 'the messenger is as important as the message'. Hence, he believed that the Prevent policy should work with organisations like

Quilliam as the ethnic and religious backgrounds of the people at Quilliam made it more effective at carrying out counter-ideological work. Although, from my fieldwork experience with other organisations that can be considered 'progressive Muslim' it was apparent that Quilliam was not perceived as 'part of the Muslim community,' partly due to political differences and partly due to the perception that Quilliam was, as one person put it, 'a tainted brand among British Muslims'.

Like the Prevent policy's approach to political violence, Quilliam's approach to other social problems that have been racialised in public discourse, like sexual violence, also externalises and essentialises it as emerging from a 'racial Other'. Hence, the solutions focus on state-focused, top-down methods of containment, exclusion, punishment, eradication, and assimilation. The perception that Quilliam was broadly disliked or mistrusted by British Muslims arises due to several high-profile controversies related to their work and activities. One of these was the negative reaction to their report on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) or 'grooming gangs' (Rafiq & Adil 2017). The interlocutors I interacted with at the IMI and LQM were passionately critical of this report as they considered it inaccurate, racist, and Islamophobic, while people at Quilliam countered that they expected such responses as they were prioritising 'the evidence' rather than 'political correctness'. In fact, the report itself stated that its aim was to give an 'academic and nuanced' account to 'an issue that many are afraid to talk about for fear of being called racist' and then highlighted that both authors are of British Pakistani and Muslim heritage which gives them 'an adequate understanding of cultural context and framework of Pakistani society' (Rafiq & Adil 2017: 5).

The authors of the report stated that initially they too had assumed that the media had over-stated ethnicity as a relevant factor for these crimes but their 'evidence-based' research led them to the conclusion: The connection of British-Pakistani ethnicity in this crime was 'conclusively irrefutable' and 'alarming' and they hoped their report would be 'an eye-opener for many' (Rafiq & Adil 2017: 6). The report used data from news reports of grooming gangs from 2005 to 2017 and two reports from the National Crime Agency's operational branch focused on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse crimes (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre 2011, 2013). The report concluded that British-Pakistani ethnicity was over-represented in such crimes, and the primary explanation for why 'there is a strain of Asian men, mostly confined to towns and cities in the North of England' that engage in group-based CSE was cultural and religious norms, attitudes, and beliefs.

The Quilliam report focused on culture and religion as the primary explanatory factors for the phenomenon of 'grooming gangs' and framed CSE as a type of 'racial hostility' since most victims in the data they used were white girls (Rafiq & Adil 2017: 30). The reports identifies some of the reasons behind this 'racial hostility' among this 'strain of Asian men': Divisive, unevolved cultural identities among Asian communities (2017: 32); cultural values related to honour and shame that 'still exist in large parts of South Asia' (2017: 32); the third-generation British-Pakistanis 'still' having a "deep personal and psychological association" with Pakistan (2017: 35); 'vast majority of British Pakistanis…are shaped by a very specific history and worldview' (2017: 36); 'cultural roots of their dysfunctional view of women, relationships, and sex' (2017: 36); the state of women's rights in Pakistan (2017: 36); and 'attitudes of extreme political correctness of those in positions of authority' (2017: 40).

Hence, their recommendations for solutions also focused primarily on culture (2017: 61–62): More research on 'why' Asian men were more likely to behave this way; more 'integration of British Pakistanis' through 'education with regards to cultural expectations in order to minimise the gap between origin and adoptive cultures'; more awareness among children and communities about CSE; a 'specialist task force' that builds specific policies with harsher sentencing; more 'open and honest debate' about the 'over-representation of one particular ethnicity in offender profiles'. The attention the report gives to describing the state of human rights in Pakistan also assumes that the activities of grooming gangs in the UK somehow have more to do with the politics in Pakistan than with the local dynamics and contexts where they operate. The report did not explore the various socio-economic, structural, and contextual factors that are linked with such crimes.

The report stated that there is an 'undeniable' pattern of over-representation of individuals with Asian ethnicity in CSE crimes despite acknowledging that the data is limited and incomplete (Rafiq & Adil 2017: 20). In fact, the two CEOPC reports they quoted as evidence for their conclusion clearly state that ethnicity descriptor data are incomplete, inconsistent, and of 'a poor standard at the point of capture' and, hence, they could not be used to draw national conclusions about ethnicity (2011: 9, 2013: 19). Similarly, the latest Home Office report on group-based CSE also concluded that that there is no credible evidence for the idea that any ethnic group was over-represented in group-based CSE offences. It concluded: 'based on the existing evidence, and our understanding of the flaws in the existing data, it seems most likely that the ethnicity of group-based CSE offenders is in line with CSA more generally and with the general population, with the majority of offenders being White (Home Office 2020: 27) It also stated that 'law enforcement data can be

particularly vulnerable to bias' (2020: 25). While the conclusion of this report dismantles purely culturalist explanations, this does not mean that cultural discourses and practices are irrelevant in understanding, identifying, or preventing sexual violence. It is interesting to note that given Quilliam's focus on the culture and religion as the primary explanation for the behaviour of minority ethnic offenders, they did not explore the 'cultural' aspects that may be relevant to the behaviours of offenders who are White. This is particularly glaring given the endemic and widespread nature of child sexual abuse in all societies, including the UK. Data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) demonstrates the alarming extent of child abuse with one in five adults in England and Wales reporting having experienced a form of child abuse before they turned 16 (Media 2020).

The narrative of sexual violence as a racialised crime is easily instrumentalised to foment Islamophobia and racism domestically, anti-immigrant and aggressive border policies, and militaristic foreign policies in the name of 'women's right' (Mahmood 2006b). For instance, the sensationalist media coverage of the 'Muslim grooming gang' in Rotherham resulted in far-right rallies; attacks on mosques, Muslim businesses and taxi drivers; Muslim girls were threatened with 'revenge' rape; and 81-year-old Muhsin Ahmed was murdered in 2015 by two white men who called him a 'groomer' (Manzoor-Khan 2022: 34). The focus on culture, religion, ethnicity of offenders did not serve the victims of such violence and abuse as it diverted resources to wasteful paths like the over-policing of minority communities rather than towards improving victim support and overlooking victims and offenders who don't fit the racial stereotypes (Cockbain & Tufail 2020). The relevance of this over-policing of minorities, both as a consequence of 'grooming' and preventing terrorism, creates a normalization of constructing Muslims as sources of societal concern.

With the ‘Prevent Duty’ counterterrorism and counter-extremism became ‘duties’ that professionals in various walks of life, including education and healthcare, are expected to perform. This expands the logic and operation of security and threat, specifically related to Islamist political violence, to all areas of life, which was its intention as the Prevent report states: ‘There should be no “ungoverned spaces” in which extremism is allowed to flourish without firm challenge and, where appropriate, by legal intervention’ (Home Office 2011b: 9). Consequently, there is criminalisation of the informal networks, associations, financial flows, and communal forms of life, which is experienced as an ever-expanding repressive force in the lives of British Muslims. Some Muslim youth find that resistance to the stigma and alienation they face in their everyday life can be effective when expressed through Islam precisely because of the fear and Islamophobia that makes public signs of Muslim religiosity a security threat. As British Pakistani punk musician, Aki Nawaz, from the band Fun-Da-Mental states, ‘Islam is more punk than punk’ (Saini 2004).

According to Foucault, neoliberal governmentality is characterized less by direct state domination and more by informal techniques of government working through new actors like civil society organisations and NGOs. This demonstrates a transformation of statehood where there is a displacement of forms of practices and politics away from the jurisdiction of the state to supra-and subnational levels. For instance, the responsibilities of the state in relation to social risks like illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., are shifted in neoliberal governmentality to society and become a problem of self-care and community-care. For instance, Narzanin Massoumi conducted a multi-sited ethnography of British counter-terrorism civil society organisations, including Quilliam. Drawing on the research, Massoumi argued that Quilliam played an important role in enacting and extending the political

repression of the state while allowing the British state to disavow direct action through utilising civil society organisations as ‘para-statal agencies’ (2021).

The Prevent policy of the government focuses on countering and preventing terrorism and its focus is specifically on the domain of public discourses, particularly religious or far-right ideologies, rather than on the domain that involves the state more directly, like foreign policy, domestic law and policies, or the socio-economic structure of society. Furthermore, under the Prevent policy it becomes the responsibility of professionals and individual citizens to be involved in the surveillance of ‘suspicious’ activities and to report them to the state. The state policy sees this as safeguarding of vulnerable individuals who may be in the process of being radicalized and can still be re-directed through counter-radicalisation interventions. Quilliam and the IMI both engage within a civil society space that is structured by Prevent and they are responsive to the broader counterterrorism framework of the British state, whether they participate in it or organise against it. In fact, Quilliam existed precisely due to the niche that became available for a civil society organisation that works on counterterrorism and counter-extremism and could make a claim of existing within the Muslim community. On the other hand, the IMI’s aim of providing an inclusive and empowering religious space for the most marginalized members of the British Muslim community makes them especially critical of Prevent and, hence, Quilliam’s approach to security.

Additionally, the promotion of Fundamental British Values in schools is framed within a ‘security and threat’ lens that approaches moral education as part of an effort to prevent’ pupils from becoming terrorists. For instance, the Department for Education has published advice to schools that they should be ‘actively promoting’ FBV as part of their

legal requirement to promote the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils while making reference to FBV as part of the Prevent strategy (Department for Education 2014: 5). However, this involves viewing some students, currently through a racialised lens, as potential threats, which creates a stigmatising and disempowering environment for them. This, however, is the criticism of groups who oppose the designers of the programme. These critics also assert that it contradicts the approach of 'education' as a practice of nurturing and empowering young people to fulfill their potential as productive members of society.

7.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the policies of Quilliam, a Progressive Muslim organisation which aimed to 'deradicalize' British Muslims. Quilliam could be described as taking a reformist position where their solution to issues related to the state and the criminal justice system are focused on how to make these institutions work better. They viewed the nation-state and state institutions as central to safety, justice, and governance. Hence, they argued that any issues in their operation are not a feature of the institutions per se but with their improper functioning. This view was challenged by other progressive Muslim organisations, as I elaborate in the next chapter, as facilitating the securitization of Muslims and placing them under suspicion Muslims as the unknown, undesirable, and suspicious 'Other' who must be under constant surveillance so that they do not harm mainstream society.

8. Counter-Extremism or Counter-State? The IMI Approach

The previous chapter examined one approach, that of Quilliam, in so far as it helps the British state, towards countering Islamic terrorism. Among other things I mentioned that the Quilliam gala celebrated its success in preventing terrorist incidents which were not viewed as something the 'normal' British society could contribute to. This chapter will examine the view of the critics of this approach especially those associated with the IMI.

Maria, one of the co-founders, explained that the IMI does not accept, or apply for, any state funding, because such funds often come with 'strings attached', i.e., the state's counter-radicalisation programme, like Prevent, which would require the surveillance and reporting that comes with the 'Prevent Duty'. She stressed that the 'signs of radicalisation' that they would be mandated to monitor if they participated in Prevent are not only vague and broad, but they also criminalise any critical religious and political stance. Furthermore, she stated, the IMI opposes participating or supporting Prevent as it is designed in a way that it can potentially securitise any public expression of 'Muslimness' regardless of any relation to violent ideology or intention. Another IMI board member added that as soon as any Muslim organisation is found to have Prevent funding the general consensus of the Muslim community is that 'you are now outside our group and it ostracizes that group.'

The issue of divergent political approaches within the 'progressive Muslim' space was raised when I was attending the first event in the seminar series organised by the IMI entitled, 'Raise Your Gaze,' held in September 2017 in central London (IMI 2017). This event was focused on 'Islamic Feminisms' and the keynote speaker was the renowned *imam* whom we have met several times, Amina Wadud. I was invited by the IMI board as part of

the process of getting approval to conduct ethnographic research with them. During the event I was introduced to several board members, employees, and volunteers from the IMI and they interviewed me to understand my research interests and methods more clearly. I mentioned to them that I was also interested in looking at other organisations in London with similar approaches to Islamic theology and practice. However, as soon as I mentioned interviewing and shadowing the Islamic scholars resident at Quilliam, one of the women working at the IMI responded, 'We only overlap with Quilliam on theology if context is removed. Our politics and worldview are very different!'

Interestingly, this sentiment was also repeated by some of the people I interacted with at Quilliam. In fact, all organisations that I interacted with for my research which share the broad Progressive Muslim approach to hermeneutics, theology, and practice would similarly acknowledge their shared theological approaches but emphasise how it was their distinctions that give a current understanding of their spiritual and political motivations. Over the span of my fieldwork, I gained an appreciation of how these distinctions and differences may appear minor when focusing only on religious discourses and practices but were indeed the key to grasping the role these discourses and practices play at both the level of individual subjectivities and the level of social power relations, i.e., politics at the individual and social levels. I will explore these issues further by describing the life experiences and perspectives of two individuals in more detail.

8.1. DE-ESSENTIALISING THE POLITICS OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

As mentioned in other contexts earlier, the IMI discusses issues concerning Muslims in its seminars. In one such event held in September 2018 as part of its 'Raise Your Gaze' seminar series, titled 'Our Prayer is Protest', politics was the focus of the discussion. This event, like

the Quilliam gala mentioned earlier, was meant to be social, mixed-gender, gatherings with a line-up of speakers together with music, dance, and food. Both events had several speakers who focused on how progressive or inclusive Islamic theology could help to counter oppressive ideologies and politics, especially by including a focus on refugee rights, anti-racism, and feminism. What divided them was how they conceptualised the 'state' in divergent ways: Oppressive or Liberatory? The Quilliam gala, as mentioned in the previous chapter, saw the state as a liberator whose policies, if properly implemented, would prevent terrorism. The IMI, as we shall see below, took the opposite view.

In the IMI event the issue of violence justified through religious (Islamist) ideology was not raised directly, but instead it was framed as tied to broader patterns of violence related to historical and contemporary imperialist, Islamophobic, and racist violence and ideologies. The focus was primarily on state-based violence, specifically within the UK context, and the ways working-class and minority ethnic Muslim communities were victimised by it and how they can liberate both themselves and the broader society. The event focused on the sources of multiple traumas experienced by working-class Muslim minority communities in their interactions with the state: heavy-handed policing of working-class Muslim neighbourhoods; constant and racially biased surveillance; socio-economic inequality and poverty; racial dynamics of gentrification; discriminatory immigration and refugee policies; and prejudice and discrimination experienced in various social institutions, like education, employment, media and healthcare. The state's vast counterterrorism and counter-extremism policies were viewed as exacerbating the harm experienced on all these fronts.

8.2. PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS AND COUNTERTERRORISM: SEEKING SECURITY WHILE BEING SECURITISED

In this section I will explore the link between progressive Muslim subjectivities, discourses, and practices and their views and approaches towards the state by providing case studies of two of my interlocutors.

8.2.1. Ali Raza

Ali Raza from the LQM had a pained expression on his face when the topic of Prevent was brought up in the conversation. At the time of my fieldwork, he was in his early 30s and identified as a 'radical'. [61] He revealed that he had an experience with the police when he was a teenager that he believes was due to someone reporting him as a 'security concern' to, as he put it, 'the pre-cursor to the current Prevent programme'.

He described the event as a traumatic experience that left him feeling like 'an undesirable person' with an increased sense of alienation, fear, and shame. He recounted that he had met a Salafi preacher, distributing leaflets and pamphlets about Islam, in the city centre where he used to live as a teenager. The man asked Ali if he was a Muslim and Ali replied that, yes indeed, he was. When the man asked him about how regularly he prayed and other questions on Islam, Ali felt embarrassed as he did not have much religious knowledge and was not practising rituals regularly. Thereafter, Ali felt motivated to go to the weekly religious gathering organised by this preacher in a local mosque regularly. This group was Sunni Salafi in its orientation while Ali was from a Shī'i family originating from the

[61] He preferred the term 'radical' over 'progressive' even though he acknowledged that his perspective would be labelled as progressive by most people. He considered the term 'progressive' as implying a secular teleology that can be used in Islamophobic ways to stigmatize already marginalized groups of Muslims as 'stuck in the past'. For him 'radical' meant someone who is critical of, and actively working to dismantle, institutions of oppression whether they justify themselves through 'liberalism' and 'secularism' or 'Islam'.

Balkans, but due to his association with this group he also started to identify as a Salafi. He recalled that this led to many arguments with his parents, particularly his mother, as they discouraged him from meeting this group or going to the Salafi mosque while he disagreed with their interpretation and practice of Islam.

Ali would often go to the mosque and sit in a corner and read the Qur'ān and other religious books. One day he was sitting and reading in the mosque when suddenly the police arrived and asked him to come out to answer a few questions. He felt terrified, embarrassed, and confused about being asked by the police to come out of the mosque. Outside, the two police officers started interrogating him with a series of questions regarding his background, where he lived, and what he was doing in the mosque. He felt rattled by this but said that he was cooperative and told them that he was recently visiting the mosque to read the Qur'ān frequently as he found it comforting and wanted to increase his knowledge. He remembers that it seemed the officers were not satisfied by his answers, and they took him to the police station where he was detained for several hours. The police told him that someone had reported him as they were 'concerned' about the changes in his behaviour, his company, and the amount of time he spent at the mosque. He felt an intense wave of anger, mixed with fear and shame, wash over him and he felt his body tremble. The officers kept asking him questions in a threatening and insulting manner for hours and made Islamophobic and racist comments, like 'You are a Paki lover,' and suggesting that he was betraying his 'White' European heritage since his family was from the Balkans.

Eventually, the police let him go, but he described that the feeling of humiliation, anger, and helplessness remained with him for a long time. He felt like he had no power to redress the way he was mistreated by the police because they held so much authority and he

felt like he would not receive any support but would rather be viewed as deserving of such treatment. He felt betrayed by the people in the mosque because they had not shown any support for him, and by his mother who blamed him by saying that if he had not been so interested in Sunni Islam, he would not have the police take him away.

Ali explained that this experience was only one in a series of almost daily experiences of Islamophobic bullying, direct or indirect racist comments, and other microaggressions[62] that contributed to a stifling and enduring feeling within him that he described as 'unsafe and undesirable'.

This feeling had driven his search for an identity and community that could give him a sense of worth, safety, and belonging as he could not find that in the communities, institutions, and interactions of his daily life. For instance, he described how he had started

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[62] Chester Pierce is credited with coining the term *microaggression* with the term *micro* conveying the everyday and commonplace nature of derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of an oppressed group. These insults and inequities can be delivered implicitly or explicitly but are often unintentional and unconscious. The term is meant to denote a different phenomenon from 'macro-aggression' or the systemic and institutional forms of bias and oppression. Far from being benign and insignificant, research indicates that microaggressions inflict a heavy psychological and physical toll on their targets. Microaggressions are also not to be confused with everyday incivilities that anyone can experience regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation/identity as they tie specifically to ideologies that produce stigma and marginality and directed at individuals with marginalised and oppressed social positionalities. Microaggressions can negatively impact one's ability to concentrate, solve problems, and learn new material. A higher cumulative amount of microaggressions negatively impacts symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and trauma; behavioural health issues like alcohol use and eating disorders; and psychological constructs such as self-esteem, worldview, and academic achievement. Recent correlational studies have also found that microaggressions have other negative health consequences—including pain, fatigue, physical functioning, and perceptions of general health (Torino et al. 2019).

therapy after the experience of police harassment to heal from that experience, as well as other traumatic experiences in his life, but even this space replicated the violence and stigma he had sought support to address.

At one point he had requested to see the therapy notes on him, and he was shocked to see that the therapist too had securitised him; instead of using a mental health framework, she had written that he was 'vulnerable to being radicalised'. He felt betrayed by this perception of him as potential threat. He asserted that not only was he always critical and reflective of different views and not dogmatic about any approach—whether religious or secular—he felt that many of his non-Muslim peers were not as reflective or sceptical. His struggles with identity, belonging, and meaning were not different from his non-Muslim peers but, unlike them, they were expressed through an exploration of his 'Muslimness'. He had not been violent, or expressed violent views, but since he was interested in religion and politics it was perceived as a 'sign of radicalisation' as he was a Muslim youth. He saw this as another example of how pervasive and unquestioned Islamophobia is within British society where even a therapist could be blind to how their own feelings of fear and prejudices informed by Islamophobia could be projected on to him in the language of safeguarding. He did not view this as empathy, compassion, or care and it made him feel stigmatised again. He had questioned whether the therapist felt any care or connection with him and his wellbeing or saw him as a potential threat that had to be neutralised before they harm others?

In this context, the Salafi 'brothers' provided him with a much-needed sense of community that affirmed his ethnic and religious identity, which, for a change, felt like positive aspects of his self rather than stigmata. The Salafi brothers also provided meaning, answers, and structure in his life which, he claimed, promoted resilience in the face of a

world that often felt hostile. Furthermore, he asserted that the experience of being harassed by the police, in fact, helped to affirm a shared identity with the Salafi brothers as outcasts from British society. In hindsight he views this part of his life as 'just another expression of typical teenage behaviour' of asserting autonomy from parents and authority figures and seeking social belonging that provides a sense of identity. Most of the other people in the Salafi group had also been teenagers and Ali reported that he knew that all of them had similar 'pretty typical' teenager issues just with an added layer of figuring out their place in society as young British Muslims.

Ali saw these experiences as important in shaping who he had become and why his religious beliefs and practices became fundamental sources of identity, meaning, and resilience for him. Eventually, he became critical of several aspects of Salafism, particularly as he did not feel aligned with the rigidity, conservativeness, and the rules-focused approach of the group. Furthermore, since he identified as Queer, he felt distraught that the affirmation of his religious and ethnic identity came packaged with yet another stigmatisation of an aspect of his identity: his gender identity and sexual orientation. He stated that these experiences had motivated him to seek queer-accepting interpretations and approaches to Islam, which brought him into contact with progressive Muslim discourses and organisations.

He believed that for him to experience genuine spiritual growth it had been crucial to be able to feel safe in a communal religious space. This had not been possible for him in other spaces in the British context as some aspect of his self was always, directly or indirectly, being devalued or constructed as incompatible with another. He felt in progressive Muslim spaces there was a greater allowance for the expression of pluralistic, individualised,

and non-conventional Islamic beliefs and practices. This allowed him to explore different Islamic ideas and practices, while being encouraged to question and wonder more openly, i.e., he felt wonder, experimentation, exploration, and play were valued. He also said he was able to be more authentic about what beliefs and practices made sense to him and facilitated his spiritual connection with Allah because he no longer felt as much pressure to perform religion for the sake of conforming to others, or to avoid being judged by others. For instance, he felt that in progressive Muslim spaces he could reveal that he wasn't fasting or praying regularly. Similarly, he was able to share about his experiences of performing rituals in unique and creative ways that were personally meaningful and facilitated his spiritual growth in ways that conventional approaches never did.

Crucially, he expressed how the progressive Muslims spaces that he was active within allowed him to connect his personal spirituality with 'how he lived in the world', i.e., his moral and political convictions. For him, his religious practice and beliefs were not 'apolitical' as he described them as being firmly tied to 'the Islamic ethic of compassion and love' for the self and others. Due to his personal experiences with feeling 'securitised' due to the discourses and practices of counterterrorism, he viewed resistance to them as an integral religious and political principle and one that is tied to achieving the liberation of all people. He explained that the reason why he had set-up the LQM was to provide an integrating Islamic space for religious queer Muslims since he had been unsuccessfully seeking such a space for himself for so long. He wanted the LQM to be a place where all the parts of the congregants were valued and viewed as facilitating, rather than interfering, with their religious growth.

Furthermore, Ali believed that participants at the LQM could experience Islam as a spiritual tradition that does not split the promotion of personal wellbeing from the political work aimed at social wellbeing. The two main events at the LQM involved the rational work of interpreting, debating, and generating progressive or Queer Islamic discourses and the spiritual work of *queering* religious rituals and then performing them together in a way meant to evoke an embodied experience of spiritual connection. For Ali both the discursive and performative aspects of Islam were essential aspects of being Muslim. Therefore, Ali viewed progressive Muslim discourse and practice as directly linked to personal and social change that worked in a holistic manner rather than as single issues isolated from each other.

8.2.2. Fatima

Fatima was working at the IMI during my fieldwork period, and was one of the first faces to greet people at the IMI spaces. She had a warm, friendly approach that made people feel welcome and at ease. She is a cis-gender, South Asian woman who was in her late-twenties at the time of my fieldwork.

As a child her family moved around for work between England, India, and Libya. Her father had trained as an accountant and her mother worked as a teacher. She described her family as being middle-class but with periods of financial precarity. She has three siblings who have all pursued higher education. She had lived in London since her teens and, when I had met her, she was living in North-West London with her spouse. She worked with the IMI to arrange the programming and handle most of the tasks needed to run the organisation.

She described her overall experience with the IMI as enriching in multiple ways: ‘The IMI is hands down the best place I have worked. I have never worked with so many women of colour before. I've never been in an organisation where women of colour have

been calling the shots. I've never been in an organisation that has so readily accepted my suggestions. That feels very validating…They are very attentive to my needs.'

Despite her positive experience with the IMI, she describes her relationship with it as a complicated journey that did not begin with an instant attraction. She recollected: 'When I first heard of the IMI I was part of an inter-faith choir and people there were talking about it being accommodating to all Muslims, but I had—and continue to have—a lot of anxiety around such spaces because my primary experience is that those spaces are apolitical and I think that is very detrimental.'

She felt wary of liberal Muslim organisations and spaces because in her experience they seem to be centred on privileged people, like middle-class Muslims. Or they focused on 'presenting Muslims' in a way that would be palatable to the mainstream non-Muslim British 'gaze'. She was instead seeking a Muslim organisation that prioritised the voices, experiences, and needs of the most marginalized members of Muslim communities, specifically working-class youth, black Muslims, Muslims with disabilities, queer Muslims, and asylum seekers and refugees.

The first event she attended was an *iftar* (sunset meal) for Ramadan and she ended up leading prayers there which was an empowering and meaningful experience for her. But she also felt underwhelmed by the experience overall, partly because the venue was a small basement room in a university in London and lacked the aesthetics of Muslim spaces that Fatima values so much. She stated, "It was just people sitting along a wall with a table of food and it felt a bit too clinical for me. It was very early days so obviously it was super makeshift."

This was a time in her life that she was enthusiastically involved in 'decolonisation' work and activism, and she wanted a space that actively addressed the ways Muslim communities continue to be impacted by the legacy of colonialism ('coloniality'), for instance, how immigration, citizenship, and employment laws have impacted quality of life, mental health, and employment opportunities for people in the UK who have personal or family histories of migration from the Commonwealth. She was specifically interested in how contemporary state policies continue to exacerbate the inequalities that the process of colonialism initiated. Fatima's political consciousness was raised during her Master's degree when one of her friends at university started a support campaign for his brother, Syed Talha Ahsan, who had been jailed and was fighting an extradition case to the USA despite never having set foot on US soil (Verkaik 2018).

Talha Ahsan is a British-born poet with Asperger's syndrome[63] who was extradited to the US on 5th October 2012 after over six years of detention without charge, trial, or *prima-facie* evidence. In total, Ahsan spent nine years in custody in the UK and in America. He was an excellent student who was educated in a prestigious private school and went to the SOAS for higher education. Talha was arrested at his home in 2006 in response to a request from the USA under the Extradition Act 2003 and was accused of terrorism-related offenses. The charges were related to Talha's alleged involvement with a series of websites during 1997-2004 that were implicated in assisting jihadist groups.

[63] Asperger's syndrome is no longer categorized as a separate diagnostic category under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 (DSM 5). It is now categorized as part of the autism spectrum disorders. Under the latest International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), both autism and Asperger's are classed under 'pervasive developmental disorders'.

Before he was extradited Talha's brother, Hamja Ahsan, started an international campaign to free Talha that coalesced into a substantial community of activists working on cases of human rights violations resulting from state practices and legislation associated with counterterrorism. The campaign, which was shortlisted for the Liberty Human Rights Award, demanded that Talha should have the right to a free and fair trial in the UK and that the extradition laws be reformed to better protect human rights. Talha was kept in solitary confinement in the United States and claimed that he was pressured to enter a plea bargain with US prosecutors to have any chance of being reunited with his family again. He was released from a supermax prison in 2015 and finally returned to Britain.

Fatima describes how horrified she was when she learned about this case, and felt morally compelled to participate in the campaign against the extradition in 2012. This case and her political activism around it connected her with like-minded Muslims that inspired her to work on human rights issues: 'Things like this happen all the time but this was a personal connection. I got involved in campaigning for him. A lot of people campaigning for him were Muslim and connected their faith to their efforts for seeking justice. I remember going to the campaign meetings and it felt really wonderful to be with all these Muslims.'

She had pursued higher education in art and was working at a prestigious art gallery before she decided she wanted to work on combating state violence and Islamophobia. Hence, she got a law conversion degree and started work with a Muslim human rights organisation in London. She described how her education and work were related to her efforts to cultivate a greater sense of spirituality and communal connection: 'I wanted to be friends with other Muslims for religious and social reasons. I was having a really hard year, and I was feeling something for this religion so I wanted to be around people who could

nourish that. I have such a deep love for Islam and had such a rich internal dialogue with it. I wanted it to be reflected outwardly as well.'

She also started to wear a hijab during that time although she discarded it later. She stressed that her decision to wear the hijab did not come out of any sense of obligation, but that she wanted to wear it as it was empowering and personally meaningful for her at that time. This was accompanied by a greater motivation to pray regularly, fast, and read the Qur'ān.

During her time at the Muslim human rights organisation, the British government had passed legislation that made Prevent a statutory duty for public service providers. Fatima's work was related to doing research on how this policy was impacting young Muslims, and even children, who were referred to the Channel programme. Fatima described cases that were reported in the media related to children in primary school being referred to the Prevent programme over teachers misunderstanding them, like a case where the child had said 'terraced home' but was interpreted by the teacher as saying that he lives in a 'terrorist home'. Fatima valued this job for both the opportunity it provided to work in an environment with so many people of colour, as well as for its advocacy for marginalised members of Muslim communities. Fatima formed her position on Prevent through an exposure to cases where the policy had been destructive to the lives of young individuals and their families. She elaborated:

> Prevent is getting harsher with its new policy. There is no way to make Prevent better because the apparatus of Prevent assumes that there is something dangerous about Muslims as a core principle. If you are targeting children then the idea is that this community is predisposed to violence. This creates a climate of intense fear. Young Muslims grow up

> feeling like they are the enemy of the state. If the argument is that terrorists are alienated by society then all Prevent does is to further alienate.

Furthermore, she also expressed concern about the counter-ideological work of Prevent because she thought it negatively impacts on the work the IMI was doing and clashes with the IMI's approach:

> The literature has become quite theological to the level of discussing what makes a Sunni or Shīʿi. Actually, when the Prevent officers find out that someone referred is Shī'i, they are not of great concern. So, from our point of view, it is important to be aware of the state apparatus trying to define an entire Muslim group as being a problem, as we are non-sectarian. The theological literature that the government is producing is becoming more and more sophisticated. They are referencing Ibn Arabi, for instance.

Fatima had also been involved in political organising in Chicago as part of an anti-violence movement led by women of colour. Through her work and friendship with these women she learned more about violence against women perpetrated by the state. She spoke eloquently about various state institutions, legislations, and policies that inflict violence and harm, especially on the most marginalised women. She addressed sexual violence in prisons, police violence and sexism, state legislatures' attacks on reproductive rights, how black and working-class women are treated unfairly within the criminal justice system, and the impact of punitive border and immigration policies on women. She described attending a conference organised by this group of activists in Chicago that was 'deeply moving' and 'inspiring' for her as it 'centred people who had experienced harm and violence from state institutions'.

She supports 'the prison abolitionist movement,' which aims to abolish and replace the police and prison system with a restorative justice approach to crime and a rehabilitative and community-led approach to addressing structural injustices that create dysfunctional and violent behaviours, conflict, and violence. She stated that meeting and hearing from people

who had suffered injustices at the hands of the criminal justice system impacted her in a transformational manner as it motivated her to ‘live by these values’ rather than just ‘pay lip service to them’.

Furthermore, she described feeling very comfortable, relaxed, accepted, and ‘free’ at the conference as the people cultivated an accepting space where people felt able to express themselves in ways that felt authentic to them. She explained how the fact that she could wear her hijab with a bright red lipstick and a short-sleeved t-shirt without sensing judgment or having to ‘explain’ or ‘justify’ herself allowed her to conceive of such spaces existing. Her experiences in other spaces have often felt laden with pressure to conform, whether it is to look and act more ‘secular’ or more ‘religious’. For instance, she has noticed that when she has a bright red shade of lipstick on in a mosque, people don’t approach her or engage with her much. She assumes it may be because they feel she is ‘beyond redemption,’ but when she doesn’t have this shade of lipstick on she has had more social engagement with other women but also more experiences of being ‘corrected,’ i.e., some aspect of her dress, conduct, or prayer practice is pointed out as needing to be changed.

Similarly, when she was working for an art gallery in London, she had similar experiences where she was made to feel either she had to change or she was excluded. She was the only non-white person and Muslim in most contexts despite her job being part of a prestigious master’s programme that was designed specifically to increase the diversity within art institutions in the country. She had been selected into the programme after a rigorous selection process and was given a generous bursary:

> It was amazing to work on an exhibition, as I didn't even have a masters. Others, even after PhD, don’t get this experience. But it was the most demoralising experience because

> everyone in the department was very resentful that I was there as they didn't understand it. When I proposed some idea, I was shut down as I was challenging the Whiteness of the institution.

She described incidents of how she would have to call out biases that people twice her age were blind to, and experienced numerous micro-aggressions daily. The everyday nature of low-level petty abuse, micro aggression, micro inequities is hard to pin down and challenge precisely because respect, self-esteem and dignity are intangible factors. It is often unconscious and invisible to the perpetrators and those from dominant groups. Challenging it is characterised as being overly sensitive or being part of 'victim cultures,' as popularised by right-wing political commentator Melanie Phillips (2007).

This was not an entirely new experience for her as she used to attend a private, all-girls school in London as a teenager and, although most of the girls were South Asian, there were hardly any Muslim students in the school. Furthermore, most of her teachers and the school staff were white and she recalled many experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination. Fatima recalls, "Actually, sometimes I would have flashes of memories of racist things they said, and I didn't realise it at that point. I encountered interpersonal racism but wasn't aware of the institutional nature of it until my masters."

As an adult working in the art world in London, she started to understand why she felt uncomfortable: the culture there gave her implicit and explicit messages that she was unacceptable if she remained identified as a practising Muslim. She points to the lack of awareness of biases and privileges she saw at her university and work, and a lack of political motivation to counter such attitudes, cultures, and structures, as the reasons she changed her field from art to human rights. As issues related to racism, Islamophobia, and violence became more central to her, going to art gallery openings geared towards privileged white

patrons felt unaligned with what she wanted to do. These experiences of being in spaces where either she was 'not Muslim enough' or 'too Muslim,' together with a desire to act on her values with like-minded people made the conference in Chicago a truly inspiring and invigorating experience.

When she came back to London and attended another IMI prayer, she met a woman who told her that she was working and training with the police. She described this experience as 'really disturbing' for her because she had just come from the Chicago conference where she had heard of all the ways the police had 'destroyed the lives of people and inflicted harm'. She stated:

> My politics is very much informed by my experiences with the police, the experiences of people I love, and the community I'm around, which is that the institutions of punishment and policing are violent and do not recognise the humanity of most of the people they interact with. I think for me to encounter someone who was not only pro-police, but also worked with them…this idea that they can be trained to become better, made me feel freaked out. I went back to IMI after that, maybe, after a year.

This interaction made her feel wary about the IMI even though she realised that this person was not central to it. Therefore, when the IMI reached out to her and offered her a full-time position as a project manager, she made sure that her political views and values matched those advocated by the IMI. She felt that the board was very responsive and she accepted the position when she felt satisfied that her values and politics aligned well with the board members and founders of the IMI.

When I had initially interviewed Fatima in 2018, she had been actively involved in organising social events, conferences, workshops, support groups, and religious events for the IMI for two years. She continued working there for another year and then decided it was

time to switch jobs. She stated that her goal was to make the events and services offered by the IMI more inclusive and welcoming, especially for working-class Muslims. She thought that the attendees at the IMI events tend to be skewed towards professional, young, university-educated, and middle-class. She had numerous discussions with black and brown, working-class Muslim youth about why they do not attend the IMI events or prayers, and her conclusion was that they did not feel welcomed, comfortable, and valued in the space.

She elaborated that in the British context most Muslims associate so-called Progressive Muslim groups, especially groups that focus on issues related to women's rights or LGBTQ+ rights, as top-down state-promoted organisations serving agendas other than the wellbeing of Muslims, rather than organisations that emerge from community initiatives and reflect their genuine needs. In her experience, working-class Muslim youth have good reasons to develop a deep distrust for anything associated with the state as it represents an institution that is hostile to them. Fatima asserted that state support of certain organisations that claimed to be Progressive Muslim in their religious orientation had done tremendous damage to the legitimacy of the issues raised by progressive Muslims as they became associated with the securitised framework of counter-radicalisation. She explained that through the counter-radicalisation framework the issues of gender, class, race, disability, and sexuality raised by progressive Muslims become divided as indicators of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, thereby alienating those who are the most marginalised within the Muslim community. She asserted that progressive Muslim groups that accept counter-extremism funding end up perpetuating narratives that support state violence against Muslims.

For Fatima the solution to the negative perceptions of progressive Muslim organisations was to demonstrate through their work a commitment to disrupting

Islamophobic narratives, institutions, and power relations. Therefore, she wanted the IMI website to clearly state their position regarding state funding, PREVENT, police violence, and the prison system. During her tenure at the IMI, she organised events that highlighted these topics and she stated that she received very positive feedback from attendees that demonstrated to her that there was a great demand and need for such events, conversations, and communities.

The two cases of Ali and Fatima point out the experiences of the perception of violence by the state as trauma caused by suspicion and questioning in Ali's case or, as in Fatima's, the vicarious experience of others causing trauma and suspicion of the state and its construction of the Muslim 'Other'. This places the debate about abolition of the law enforcing system which follows.

8.3. THE DEBATE ABOUT ABOLITIONISM

Abolitionism refers to the contemporary movement and political ideology that seeks transformative social change that would result in the complete dismantling of contemporary criminal justice institutions. While, the immediate focus of the abolitionist movement is on the dismantling of punitive state apparatus like prisons and police forces, the movement views these as parts of a larger structure of hierarchical violence that expresses itself in various guises. They imagine alternatives based on community-based 'transformative justice' approaches that focuses on restorative approaches to dealing with the harm a victim suffers and rehabilitative approaches to accountability for any harm a perpetrator inflicts. The focus of abolitionism is not just on the individual cases of harm and the people involved but on the broader structural reasons for social harm expressed through individual cases. Hence, they advocate not just community-based accountability and restorative justice strategies but also

large-scale structural changes that prevent people from committing social harm on themselves and others.

The movement is critical of approaches to justice that are top-down and state-led as they claim this leads to more harm while community-based approaches that are local and flexible allow for better accountability and restorative justice. On the other hand, they advocate the macro-social perspective when it comes to 'crime prevention' policy as they consider all forms of social arrangements that inflict violence, inequality, and harm to people's dignity as producing crime as a social phenomenon and hence any approaches that are retributive in their understanding of justice as maintaining a society that will have interpersonal and state violence. Contemporary activists claim that their movement is tied historically to the 1800s American movement against slavery but to be a broader vision of changing social conceptions of both what justice looks like as well as what the state can or cannot do to promote justice. The goal of the abolitionist movement is broader than just abolishing prisons and the police. It aims to dismantle the basic structure of power in society. At its most radical, it aims to challenge the legitimacy of a capitalist state in the first place and instead advocates anarchist models of self-governance and organisation of neighbourhoods and communities (McDowell & Fernandez 2018). Hence, it often resists reforms that are meant to make the existing systems work in a more fair and efficient manner because they view them as trying to patch specific 'errors' in a machine that is designed to produce such 'errors', i.e., they are a feature of these institutions rather than an error.

In 2018, the IMI held its annual retreat in a welcoming Jewish, 'kosher' farmhouse in rural Kent. I joined the 2018 retreat as it was part of my ongoing participant-observation of the IMI. The annual retreat is not open to the public or to the general congregation as it is an

opportunity for the staff, board, and volunteers to gather and plan the schedule, events, and goals for the next financial year. It is also an opportunity for training in various skills and aspects of running the IMI., for instance, how to lead prayers; how to create a safe and welcoming environment for the prayer congregants or event attendees; or the basics of British Sign Language (BSL). Importantly, it is a time for those most regularly and actively involved in the IMI community to strengthen and nurture their relationships with each other. The retreat occurs over a weekend and the IMI covers the entire cost of the weekend including the travel, accommodation, and programming costs.

During the retreat the topic of abolitionism was also one that lead to the most animated, emotional, and lengthy discussion and debate. One of the IMI's core values is to never work with the police either directly or indirectly. One of the volunteers, Nora, asked what was meant by 'working with the police'? Maria, a member of the IMI board, stated that it meant providing any of the IMI's expertise in training, research, or community contacts. Nora expressed concern about this approach stating, 'I agree that the priority of IMI should be to create a safe space, but I would be worried that if a crime happens, let us say someone has been a victim of sexual violence, we give them a message that they should not involve the police.' About training and other facilitation she differed from the IMI approach saying: 'I disagree with this because I think those would be very productive things to do and if we don't engage with them how are we changing them?' Maria Responded: 'There is a big difference between working with the police and having engagement that is necessary to deal with immediate issues of crime and violence. We would engage with the police when a crime has occurred because in the current system that is a necessity for seeking justice and for safety.' Naila, another board member at the IMI, responded, 'I don't think we can change

them and working with them legitimises their violence against the marginalised Muslim communities that we are seeking to protect.' Another IMI volunteer, Rabia, added, 'I come from an abolitionist perspective where the goal is to ultimately not have police be part of our social system.'

Naila, an Afro-Caribbean, cis-gender woman who was in her thirties and part of the IMI's board, stated that even in cases where there has been a crime it should not be assumed that the police will always be a source of safety and justice and the IMI should always give the victim of the crime the choice of involving the police or not. She shared her experience of approaching the police after she was attacked by someone. She stated that the interaction with the police had not only not been supportive but added to the trauma and negativity of the situation. Maria asserted that racial bias was not due to a few 'bad apples' but a 'rotten crate', and how she does not believe that reform efforts are successful in tackling these issues and only 'abolishing' the police and replacing them with community-based, preventative, and rehabilitative approaches would work. She stated that the police as an institution was set up to protect the wealth and power of a minority rather than to protect the majority. She pointed to the evidence from sentencing statistics demonstrating that the majority of people who are convicted for crimes are from the most marginalised segments of society, specifically working-class and racial minorities. She shared her own experiences with the police, which also left her feeling stigmatised and unsafe. She described how these experiences shaped her view of the way the British state and social structure operates, which she asserted was 'to maintain racial and socio-economic inequalities'.

She shared her experiences in the context of the discussion on 'core values' as it was apparent that not everyone in the room had the same experiences with the police. The fact

that those who carried more race and class privileges had substantially different perceptions of, and experiences with, the police The discussion demonstrated that the universal language of ‘law and order’ hides the extent to which the actual experiences, interactions, and consequences of it are not uniform but drastically different based on social positionality, i.e., the level of ‘privilege’ one has in a social context (Karakatsanis 2019). For instance, it was clear for me that my personal experiences of policing in the UK are impacted by the socio-economic privilege and protection that comes from living and interacting primarily within an elite university context. I could see that recounting her experiences with the police was emotionally difficult for Maria but her courage in sharing them allowed the group to witness a social reality that some people in the group did not have a direct experience of. This shifted the dynamic of the conversation from a rational debate with pros and cons on the core values to a collective affective experiencing of the experiences that inform those core values.

Maria began by describing being repeatedly and frequently stopped by the police, often when she is driving. These stops involve being interrogated and having her vehicle and person searched in a very public setting. This was often done in a manner that felt threatening to her and made her feel humiliated. She was convinced that these checks were ‘not random’ but due to her looking ‘visibly Muslim’. Maria asserted that there is systemic Islamophobic and racist bias in how policing is done in the UK and that her experiences were not isolated, as other people of colour in her social network, including family members, friends, neighbours, relatives, and colleagues, were also being frequently stopped and searched by the police.

For instance, she described, with visible distress, how her, now adult, adopted son had been racially profiled by the police to such an extent that he had learned to pre-emptively

empty and pull out his pockets whenever he saw the police on the streets. Her voice faltered as she elaborated, 'He does this before the police officers even stop him because he has just come to expect and accept that they will pick him out of a crowd.' She shared how heart breaking it is for her to witness the sense of humiliation, alienation, anger, frustration, and injustice her son describes following such repeated aversive interactions with the police. She continued that her brother had also been 'traumatised by the police' as they showed up at his home unexpectedly one day, questioned him, and then detained him as he was suspected for a crime he never committed. She clarified that her brother was cleared in the courts on all the charges, but this was another traumatic experience with the police for her entire family. She described how this was a generational issue for her as when her father had initially come to the UK he was repeatedly beaten up by police officers.

Maria referred to the Macpherson Report, which concluded in 1999 that the Metropolitan Police is 'institutionally racist'.[64] She stated that despite the reform efforts emerging from this report the police continue to be institutionally racist. The Macpherson report had indeed sparked a national conversation on racial bias in policing and, while 67 of the report's 70 recommendations led to specific changes in practice or the law within a couple of years, data shows that the gap in 'stop and search' and other policing interventions based on race has *increased* since 1999 (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2009: 7).

[64] The report was the culmination of a judicial public inquiry by Sir William Macpherson ordered by the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, in 1997 to investigate how the police deals with racially motivated crimes, specifically the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Lawrence was an 18-year-old, Black Londoner, who was murdered by a group of white youths in an unprovoked attack on 22nd April, 1993. Even though the suspects were identified soon after, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) dropped the charges against them due to, what they called, a 'lack of evidence' and 'unreliable witnesses'. One of the reforms emerging from the Macpherson report was the removal of 'double jeopardy' rules, which resulted in the conviction and imprisonment of two of the suspects of Lawrence's murder in January 2012.

Additionally, the report had recommended matching the ethnic make-up of the police according to the communities they operated within, but an examination of the impact of the Macpherson report showed that not only was this not achieved by 2009 but officers from BAME backgrounds were experiencing high levels of racism and discrimination within the police force (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2009). According to the latest statistics, while 40% of London's population comes from BAME backgrounds only 14% of Met officers are BAME. Accordingly, if the Met continues to recruit from BAME communities at this rate, it will take a century to build a workforce that truly reflects the community it serves (Freeman-Powell 2019). Despite these reforms, the Met has been rocked with major 'scandals' around all kinds of prejudices, harassment, discrimination and corruption both within their ranks as well as in their interactions with the public resulting in more calls for 'reform' and forcing the Met police Chief, Cressida Dick, to resign (Bowden 2022).

Naila echoed Maria's sentiments and asserted that more BAME police officers will not address racism in policing or the underlying factors that lead to crime. Similarly, Serena, another member of the IMI board, stated that she understands and acknowledges that there are 'sincere individuals with good intentions' in the police that want to work within the institution to improve it and she is open to having a conversation and working with them at an interpersonal and informal level, but the IMI will not work with the police at an institutional level. Another person objected that for the presence of a police officer who attends the IMI spaces at a personal level felt 'triggering' and they noted that there are also other community members who feel the same way because they are specifically seeking a

space where they can escape reminders of an institution that threatens and harasses them daily.

In all these issues the ‘radical’ approach or ‘abolitionist’ stance insists on a non-compromising dismantling of the system and views ‘liberal reform’ as helping the system adjust and adapt to new demands and conditions while keeping intact its core exploitative power structure. Those who seek reform claim that there is something of value within existing practice, discourses, and sets of relations while those who seek abolition claim that it is holistically and inherently unsalvageable. Furthermore, in terms of actual strategies the abolitionist or radical stance can be expressed through reforms as well but the intentions and goals are different from the reforms pursued by those advocating the reformist approach. For instance, the abolitionist movement uses the term ‘non-reformist reform’ for the type of reform that facilitates the process of dismantling an oppressive institution as opposed to a ‘reformist reform,’ which indirectly or tacitly strengthens or affirms it (McDowell & Fernandez 2018: 383). In short, the IMI’s approach to the state is the opposite of that of Quilliam.

8.4. CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented evidence of the experiences and views of two interlocutors, one from the LQM and the other from the IMI in detail and a discussion about the state at the IMI. Both interlocutors were traumatised by the criminal justice system of the state into rejecting it altogether. This ‘abolitionist’ stance expressed at the discussion about core values at the IMI claims that the state, and its criminal justice and policing apparatus, are not there to ‘serve and protect’ but to serve the interests of those who benefit from the status quo. This approach being different from the one that Quilliam had employed in its assessment of the

causes of these injustices as it blames the state itself for transgression against Muslims, marginalizes these progressive Muslims even from within. Thus, some Progressive Muslims, such as at the IMI, position their religious subjectivities and practices as resistant to state structures.

9. Conclusion

This thesis is an ethnographic study of some Progressive Muslim Organisations in the U.K with focus on the IMI for the most part. The other organisations which have been studied are the LQM, MECO, and Quilliam. The LQM has been referred to in the context of the gender identity of Queer Muslims (specifically transgender and intersex people) who feel alienated not only in mainstream Muslim places of worship but even in inclusive, progressive ones like the IMI. Quilliam has been the focus of attention in the context of the politics of Muslims in the U.K. in which negotiating the tensions between counter-extremism and Islamophobia is the biggest ongoing challenge. While MECO provides an example of a progressive Muslim organisation that was primarily engaged in providing an 'intellectual' approach to progressive 'British Islam'. Hence, MECO's work focused on developing a progressive Muslim theology and practice that was critical of dominant Islamic discourses and practices.

Academic and media attention on Muslims often focuses on what makes Islam and Muslims *different* from 'the West', modernity, secularism, and liberalism (Huntington 1996). Anthropology often finds itself grappling with dichotomies and tensions that turn out to be productive interfaces of theoretical and ethnographic debate and inquiry (Latour 2000; Strathern 2005). My research aims to interrogate the central tension between the anthropological focus on human diversity and heterogeneity and the opposite desire to highlight our common humanness and shared experiences.

This tension has played out in the anthropology of religion with the secular-religious dichotomy beginning with the classical secularisation theory building on the assumption of shared human conditions and trajectories to an extent that it led to an imposition of the

Western culturally-contingent concept of ‘the secular’ as a real, unproblematic, and universal phenomenon (Cannell 2010). Asad’s (2003) deconstruction of ‘the secular’ problematised this rigid focus on sameness and allowed anthropologists to describe and explain the multiple contextual ways modernity plays out in the Muslim world. In the context of the post-9/11 debate over ‘the Muslim question’ concerning integration (Norton 2013), this analytical opening was used by anthropologists to focus on the differences between Muslim subjects and the secular liberal Western subjects to challenge the systems of oppressive powers that stigmatise and obliterate differences.

The theoretical paradigm that has dominated looks at how these various processes of modernity have led to an 'objectification of religion' (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 38) that has made Muslims self-consciously engage with the discursive tradition of Islam in a way that reacts to both ‘traditional’ and localised practices as well as the hegemonic Western discourses and practices (Bowen 2016; Fernando 2014). The self-formation projects of piety movements (Ahmad 2009; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005) and the world-making efforts of political Islamist movements are not indicative of an inability to modernize but, in fact, represent thoroughly modern engagements of Muslims with the concept of ‘the secular’ (Bayat 2010; Masud et al. 2009; Meijer 2013; Metcalf 2002; Roy 2004; Wickham 2002). Similarly, the literature on British Muslims has continued the focus on the modernist religious revivalism that is explicitly constructed to be distinct from both ‘tradition’ and ‘secular modernity’ and also publicly visible (Ballard & Banks 1996; Bowen 2016; DeHanas 2013; Lewis 1994; Modood 2005; Shaw 2002; Tarlo 2010; Werbner 1996, 2002).

The anthropological literature’s focus on Islamic revivalism has allowed anthropology to challenge the stereotypes and ‘moral panic’ (Fadil 2011: 85) surrounding

Muslim differences but an exclusive focus on how the modern Muslim subject is constituted from fundamentally different, and often opposed, discourses has ironically retained the sameness/difference binary that Asad's theoretical approach aimed to deconstruct (Osella & Soares 2010: 12). The literature on 'liberal' or 'secular' Muslims is still in an 'embryonic phase' (Fadil 2011: 85) and is beginning to analyse Western 'secular' or Progressive Muslims' historical and political context and how their discourses and everyday practices interact with the regulatory powers of the secular state (Fernando 2009; Gholami 2015; Kamal 2014; Mas 2006; Merolle 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Tambar 2009).

Therefore, by focusing on the identity politics of Inclusive and Progressive Muslims, I aimed to expand the way anthropology has understood the nature of, and the ramifications of, the 'objectification of Islam' and the ways Muslims engage with 'the secular' and 'the religious' (Gellner 2020). Specifically, this research was guided by the broad questions: What does the word 'progressive' mean, and what does it do, in the specific contexts where it is invoked as a self- or other-focused identity marker for Muslims in Britain? How and why do Progressive Muslims engage with the Islamic discursive tradition as well as other contemporary and influential discursive structures? Specifically, I focused on three key sites that represent 'fault-lines' or issues that have become productive in projects of self and other boundary and identity formations for both British Muslims and the broader British public. I have sought to elucidate how progressive Muslims provide a uniquely informative site of understanding these broader debates, contestations, and processes due to their negotiation and engagement at the 'fault-line' itself, i.e., their positionality as a religious minorities within an already marginalised, and heavily securitised, religious minority

I have described how, for Progressive Muslims, the correct approach to the Islamic tradition is a religiously guided mission to provide solutions to the epistemological, ethical, and theological crises they perceive within contemporary Islam. They stress that their approach is grounded in the Islamic tradition rather than a secular approach to the world, but also that their Islamic approach concerns itself with the secular world as much as it does with the beliefs and practices internal to Islam because they view the two to be fundamentally connected. Therefore, they claim that their efforts to approach Islam anew are not simply an intellectual exercise but also a grassroots political practice that is meant to challenge the orthodox positions responsible for 'exclusivist, violent, and misogynist interpretations' of Islam (Safi 2003b: 28).

9.1. MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY

The second theoretical strand that focuses the questions and issues explored in this thesis concerns the dynamics of occupying the positionality of being a 'minority within a minority'. These are minorities that are marginalised and stigmatised within their community, while their community is, in turn, also marginalised and stigmatised in the broader social context (Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev 2005). Specifically, I have described the complex interactions of the minority of Progressive Muslims within the British Muslim community.

As we have seen, the positionality of marginality and the desire for progressive change within the centre of Islamic status quo is a prominent theme in progressive Muslim discourses. One reason why the Muslim majority community, the Sunnis, desire consensus and unity, as communicated to me by one of my interlocutors who identifies as Sunni, is that he values the Sunni majority tradition because it prioritises consensus and the 'middle ground' position of the Muslim community as a reaction to the *fitnah* (civil strife and chaos)

caused by the extreme movements and ideas, like those of the *Khārijites*[65] in the past and the militant Islamists of the present.

However, although there is no absolute consensus on beliefs, rituals, or opinions about *any* topic within the IMI or, more broadly, the Progressive Muslim community, the range of ideas and practices are not unbounded either. Not only is the progressive Muslim positionality in Britain defined by being a 'minority within a minority' but their ontological, epistemological, and ethical positions also aim to decentre dominant approaches within the Islamic tradition. Therefore, the margin that all progressive Muslims share—despite their immense diversity, contestations, and disjunctions—is the space animated by the aim of progressive change in the Islamic discursive structure in the light of those modern and postmodern ideas, values, and practices that many contemporary Islamic communities view as key sites of contestation that delineate the boundary between Islam and Muslims from the 'Other'.

These broader debates, concerning the nature and extent of legitimate critique, impact the lives of individuals occupying marginalised or oppressed positionalities within Muslim communities disproportionately because their intersectional identities expose them to multiple simultaneous oppressions, critiques, and challenges, e.g., the twin burden of homophobia and Islamophobia experienced by LGBTQIA+ Muslims. This places them (often unwillingly and detrimentally) in the centre of larger ideological and political clashes between Muslims and their detractors (sometimes identified more vaguely, and inaccurately, with the catch-all-term: 'The West'). These larger clashes may centre, instrumentalise, and focus on their identities but do not necessarily reflect or protect their concerns and interests.

[65] For a brief history on the Khārijites, see Watt (1973).

For instance, the way homonationalist policies and discourses function to pit gay rights against Islam in ways that detrimentally impact not only Muslim minorities and sexual minorities, but especially those who exist in the intersections of these two communities and identities (Zanghellini 2012b).[66]

This is particularly prevalent in the frequency with which Muslim women and their rights are utilised for varying political agendas that do not emerge from the concerns of Muslim women themselves (Abu-Lughod 2013; Brown 2008). For instance, scholars have argued that the banning of burqinis in the French riviera beach resorts in the name of feminism stems more from concerns that French Muslims are a threat to traditional 'French culture' rather than from allying with French Muslim women by centring their voices, needs, activism, and welfare (Bowen 2006).

On the other hand, the defence of orthodox Muslim gender relations and roles is articulated through the discourses and institutions shaped primarily by male Islamic scholars rather than those at the margins (e.g., Muslim women or other gender and sexual minorities). Undoubtedly, orthodox Muslim gender relations are also advocated vocally by Muslim women in France and elsewhere[67] themselves, but I would argue that the authoritative Islamic discourses and institutions—and the parameters and terms of debates—they rely on are primarily the product of male Muslim scholars that are part of the dominant Islamic school (s) of thought in their context. Women often serve as symbolic markers of a

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[66] For instance, by potentially using LGBTQ+ rights as a way to present Islam as a fundamental threat to 'civilised' nations and hence, Muslims as a minority that has to be excluded from the country and civil society. On the other hand, creating antagonism towards LGBTQ+ rights as simply racist, imperialistic, and Islamophobic, and resulting in counter-policies or renewed hostility against sexual and gender minorities and 'gay rights' in general.

[67] This is described evocatively by numerous anthropological studies on Muslim women in Islamic piety movements (Ahmad 2009; Mahmood 2005).

community's identity and, hence, are placed at the forefront of both attacks upon and the defence of that community. Women's bodies and lives frequently serve as the medium through which a community maintains its identity and ideological 'borders' and through which it seeks socio-political power and influence (Yuval-Davis 1997). These processes and battles occur for agenda and reasons that are often beyond the ones that concern the needs, welfare, and articulated desires of most of the women in whose name they occur.

9.2. THE POLITICS OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

A crucial aspect of the way Muslims are seen in the U.K. are in relation to possible acts of Islamist terrorism. I therefore looked at the way Progressive Muslim organisations, focusing primarily on Quillian and the IMI, have addressed this issue. Quilliam used the Prevent framework which lends itself to a 'clash of civilisations' narrative where the solution replicates the logic of the problem it is supposed to address. Both, Quilliam and the 'clash of civilisations' narrative view the world as composed of a moral victimised 'Self' that must eradicate, contain, or control a morally irredeemable and incomprehensible 'Other'.

The IMI, however, approaches the state itself as violent. In its logic extremism is seen as a dysfunctional dynamic *within* a shared social body which would require different solutions that engage with the parts of social body—hence, be perceived as parts of the 'Self'—that maintain violent dynamics with the aim of resolving it. This requires an introspective approach rather than an externalizing one. Furthermore, for the IMI, the Prevent strategy is placed in a framework of 'safeguarding' meant to 'support' and 'protect' 'vulnerable' people, but viewing and categorising individuals primarily through a lens of 'risk' and 'threat' further alienates, stigmatises, and traumatises them. Instead of locating the origin of violence and hate at the level of individual beliefs, it may be more productive to

trace the causal chains further back to the socio-political factors that produce these 'vulnerabilities'. Hence, when the anger and hate of those who threaten 'us' are understood as emerging from motivations completely alien to those that drive the 'Self'[68]—i.e., irrational or evil—then the only options available to deal with them are containment, eradication, control, dominance, and punishment. These options dehumanize and depoliticize the motivations and reasons that drive violent extremism and leave no space for change, understanding, engagement, or resolution. Prevent policy and Islamophobia legitimise one another while providing a justification for the targeting and criminalisation of an entire community as a security matter and brought by the community on itself due to its own extremism.

In short, for the IMI and other progressive Muslims who agree with them (such as my interlocutor Ali from the LQM), violent extremism in thought and action are viewed as 'strategies of survival,' which are harmful to self and others but essentially attempts to deal with dysfunctional interpersonal and structural forces. Viewing political and personal violence though this lens opens possibilities of rehabilitative and preventative solutions that do not remain restricted to reacting to the individual or replicating and strengthening the forces that led to the individual's behaviours.

9.2.1. The Power of the Multiply Marginalised

The debates and politics around gender, religion, and sexuality are at the core of the way Muslim identities are constructed, expressed, and perceived by themselves and others. We

[68]In this context the 'Self' does not refer to an individual's sense of selfhood or self-image but to all the aspects of identity, belonging, and connection that construct the 'collective Self', including nationality, state, and governance institutions and discourses.

have seen how they are particularly politicised, precisely because they concern the larger questions of *who* exercises power and *how* that power is exercised both within and between communities.[69] The power of different institutions, organisations, and individuals rests with the perceived legitimacy of the discourses associated with them. The clashes in basic assumptions about how we can know anything (epistemology), what the nature of reality and the purpose of life is (theology related to metaphysics and ontology), and what is 'good' or 'bad' (morality/ethics) are not only theological, jurisprudential, or philosophical clashes but also about how power, status, and wealth are distributed. Therefore, focusing on the issues of gender, marriage, clothing, sexuality, identity, religious beliefs, and practices of Progressive Muslims provide a window into the larger questions of how power is distributed in British Muslim communities. Therefore, I have asked the questions: How and why are my interlocutors trying to shift the status quo? Furthermore, what discourses and alternative power structures do they rely upon and strengthen in the process of seeking progressive change?

These questions are inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod's persuasive analysis of Egyptian Bedouin women's resistance to certain traditional moral codes and authority structures in their community through their poetry and creative expressions. Abu-Lughod studied these 'rebellions' to understand not only the discourses and structures they were challenging but also the ones they were alternatively strengthening. Hence, she advocates using 'resistance as a diagnostic of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42) rather than just as a way to resist power. That is, resistance should not be seen only as 'freedom' from the power of certain authority

[69] This idea is expressed by the slogan, 'The personal is political' which was popularised through second-wave feminist authors like Betty Friedan (2013) in the 1960s. It is so commonly used now that it can be considered a cliché, which is a good indicator of the centrality of these issues in contemporary political discourse.

figures and institutions (and the associated discourses) but also as a tool to show us the *alternative* power structures that enable, animate, and legitimise the resistance and gives it meaning.

Similarly, by examining the beliefs and practices of Progressive Muslims we can also 'detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990: 48) that help track the multiple pathways that Muslim communities have taken, are taking, and aspire to take. Importantly, Abu-Lughod cautions against an overly romantic understanding of resistance that only focuses on what is being resisted, and the oppressions that emanate from those discourses and power structures, without also analysing the sets of authority structures—with their concurrent liberations and oppressions—that come with the proposed alternatives. For instance, she describes how the modern fundamentalist Islamic movement in Egypt serves as a kind of 'double resistance to two conflicting sets of demands—the demands of their elders and the system of face to face kin-based authority they represent, on the one hand, and on the other the demands of the national westernized and capitalist state in which…they participate only marginally' (1990: 52). But focusing only on the potential liberation from that side of the equation of resistance ignores the set of disciplines, demands, and authority structures, as well as opportunities, that fundamentalist Islam provides.

This thesis has looked at what is being resisted—mainstream Islamic discourses and practices—and the consequences (liberatory as well as constraining) of the alternative discursive structures and institutions—individual human rights, secularism, science/empiricism/rationality— that animate this resistance and are in turn strengthened. This is not to claim that all changes in discursive structures and authority structures eventually distribute power in ways that have the same consequences for the wellbeing of

individuals but to prevent being blind to the strengths and weaknesses of the discursive and power structures that communities aspire towards. For instance, the emphasis on a rational hermeneutics of the Qur'ān by many progressive Muslims led to the marginalisation of spiritual practices that were deemed as irrational, traditional, and not justified by the sacred texts. This has resulted in some British Muslims identifying as 'progressive' to set-up their own organisations and communities that focus more on the Spiritual rather than the Intellectual path of progressive Islam. This is an emerging boundary that was blurry and flexible at the time of my fieldwork but based on my observations it seems likely that the two approaches will eventually become more distinct from each other for a substantial segment of the community.

Hence, Progressive Muslims help us understand the nature of contemporary Islam and the changes, opportunities, and conflicts central to how Islam functions in Muslims' daily lives. It does so because it represents a crucial and highly-charged fault-line between distinct—albeit overlapping—ideologies about the nature of the world (ontology), how we can get knowledge and know what is true (epistemology), and what defines ethics, moral goals, 'good' in this world and/or the 'hereafter' (Duderija 2010). The changes in the margins of the global ʾ*ummah*, particularly those occurring in Western liberal democracies, represent creative experiments in tackling and engaging with modern and post-modern challenges to traditional mainstream Islamic legal and theological assumptions. The influence Progressive Muslims have over contemporary Islamic discourses and practices depend not only on how well they seem to resolve recurring dilemmas Muslims face in the contemporary era but also the broader socio-political impact and use of their discourses and practices. The latter is particularly challenging in the post 9/11 context of Muslim

populations being heavily securitised in Western contexts and the increasing purchase of Islamophobic discourses in Western countries as well as global foreign policy narratives and practices. Therefore, the politics of progressive Muslims has to be studied in a manner where their interventions in Islamic discourse and praxis remains mindful of not only their resistance to traditional or mainstream Islamic authority structures but how they relate to broader power structures in contemporary domestic and international politics. I have attempted to highlight how many progressive Muslims in Britain are keenly aware of how their 'minority within a minority' positionality requires careful calibration of their political interventions as the issues of Muslim women and queer people have been politicised as key sites justifying Islamophobic policies.

This thesis is about both the advantages and the hindrances that emerge from being in this particularly contested and key ideological and identity fault-line. A feminist Muslim who leads mixed-gender prayers because of her faith in Allah as a gender-neutral sacred force brings together the concept of gender equality as understood within modern liberal frameworks of individual rights with the body of traditional Islamic concepts of gender. Simultaneously, these progressive Muslim ideas also challenge the basic assumptions of the secular humanist and feminist frameworks by centring the Revelation of an agentic moralising God as the ultimate basis of these liberal feminist ethics. This approach to feminism does not rely on the human individual's agency as the source of the feminist politics but instead submission to Allah is considered the aim that then would lead to gender justice and equity. The progressive Muslim epistemology focuses on reading and interpreting the Divine Revelation found in the Qur'ān as the ultimate source of knowledge, values, and beliefs. The conclusions of their interpretations often align with liberal feminist concepts and

ethics but not with the underlying non-theological assumptions about ontology or epistemology.

Furthermore, many progressive Muslims construct their religious subjectivity and, therefore their ethics and politics, through Spiritual non-textual practices that reject empiricism, reason, and legal approaches as the primary sources to Divine Truth. This approach to Islamic meaning-making runs counter to some of the fundamental meaning-making practices of contemporary societies and poses a challenge to them. At the same time, these embodied approaches are pursued precisely to the challenges and opportunities faced by progressive Muslims in their daily lives living in highly diverse and rapidly changing social contexts. Hence, these practices are embedded within broader discourses and unresolved debates related to gender, sexuality, disability, faith, law, state, and economic structures, i.e., they are actively participating in the broader discursive context rather than an example of turning away, isolating, or rejecting them. Therefore, progressive Muslims are potentially both ideally placed to create a bridge between different discursive structures as well as precariously placed in a liminal positionality that can, and often is, viewed with hostility and suspicion.

9.3. CONCLUSION

The exploration of the intersectional religious interpretations and practices of Progressive Muslims and their balancing of combating Islamophobia and oppressions articulated through religious discourses and practices can provide an analytical attempt to sidestep the sameness/difference binary—as well as the 'good'/'bad' Muslim; secular/religious; co-opted/resistant binaries—by simultaneously tracing the conjuncture of multiple discourses and power structures operating within progressive Muslim spaces and their contexts. Furthermore, I aim to also sidestep these binaries—as far as possible—by analysing the

power relations that structure the knowledge claims and representations of sameness or difference both within anthropology and the discursive world of my interlocutors (Fadil & Fernando 2015: 82).

Hence, I have attempted to highlight the ways the same, or similar, religious discourses and practices can lead to divergent politics depending on the power structures and representations they align with. Progressive Muslims, like all others, create their own folk binaries to inform their projects of self- and world-making but focusing only on the religious meaning-making practices that remain within the realm of the 'intellectual' obscures the other ways power functions in projects of self-care that are embodied and experiential rather than analytical or discursive. One of the key strengths of anthropology is its capacity to enable us to think new thoughts and to take seriously both our own disciplinary logics and the cultural logics of our interlocutors. Therefore, tracing the relationship between different modes of power and the discourse and praxis of religious subjects negotiating multiple, often conflicting, needs and motivations reinforce anthropology's key strengths within the anthropology of religion and the discipline as a whole.

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