

"You Don't Need a Fatwa": Muslim Feminist Blogging as Religious Interpretation

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A Thesis in the
Department of Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Communication Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 2016

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ABSTRACT

“You Don’t Need a Fatwa”: Muslim Feminist Blogging as Religious Interpretation

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Through an examination of four prominent blogs written by self-identified Muslim feminists in North America, this dissertation looks at blogging as it relates to Islam, gender, sexuality, religious interpretations, community, and the public sphere. I begin by locating blogging in relation to literature on the public sphere, counterpublics, and alternative media, looking at issues including the divisions between public and private, questions of self-disclosure and anonymity, and the different shapes that audiences and communities may take in response to a blog. Using Sa’diyya Shaikh’s (2007) notion of “*tafsir* through praxis” – a lens through which she considers Muslim women’s lived experiences as sources of religious interpretation – I propose the concept of “*tafsir* through blogging.” I argue that blogging shapes the development of religious interpretation online in a number of ways as it weaves together personal narratives, textual interpretations, short episodic posts, audiovisual elements, and public discussions with an audience of readers.

The investigation of this practice through a focus on the topics of menstruation, queer issues, and gendered prayer spaces offers insights into how the bloggers’ writing practices challenge dominant discourses about women’s bodies, construct online interpretive communities, and provide new perspectives on Muslim feminist work. My examination of the bloggers’ discussion of menstruation looks at how the writers challenge expectations that menstruation should be kept private and conceptions of menstruating bodies as contaminated. Next, I look at how the bloggers use their writing to point to the

limitations of dominant Muslim discourses on queer sexualities and relationships. Through an examination of blog posts and comments related to women's prayer spaces in mosques, I consider the collective, public, and counterpublic dimensions of *tafsir* through blogging. The dissertation concludes by considering what the format of blogging means for questions of authority and legitimacy among Muslim feminists, suggesting that for these women writers whose ideas and online writing styles may be seen as far outside of the religious mainstream, blogging provides them an alternate avenue for establishing legitimacy as participants in public conversations about gender and Islam.

Acknowledgements



This dissertation would have looked very different were it not for the four women whose blogs are featured within it. I am indebted to Kirstin Dane, Shehnaz Haqqani, Ify Okoye, and Nahida Nisa for the thoughts and reflections they have shared online, and for their generous participation with interviews and follow-up conversations.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Jeremy Stolow, for his careful attention to the project, his insightful comments and suggestions, and his kind support throughout the writing process. I am grateful also for the thoughtful edits of Dr. Yasmin Jiwani, who played a major role in encouraging me to undertake this project from the beginning. Dr. Monika Kin Gagnon was also a supportive voice during the very early stages of this project, and I am thankful to her and to Dr. Gada Mahrouse for being part of my committee. Along with her brilliant and relevant published work, Dr. Julianne Hammer has long stood out as someone who goes out of her way to support junior scholars, and I am honoured to have her as my external examiner.

I am grateful also to so many others at Concordia who have taught me and supported me throughout my time as a doctoral student, including Dr. Kim Sawchuk, Dr. Krista Geneviève Lynes, and fellow students such as Kenza Oumlil, Mariam Esseghaier and many others.

Nermeen Mouftah, provided much-needed motivation, encouragement, and company during our morning online writing sessions, without which this dissertation might never have been finished. Farah Kashem has been a constant source of friendship and support through the process of writing this dissertation, and her insightful reflections on Islam, gender, and tradition have contributed significantly to the ideas within it. Sajida Jalalzai's intelligent critiques have also enriched this work, as has her caring and compassionate presence during visits across the border when I needed to get away. Kristi Kouchakji read through the entire dissertation and helped tone down my "impressively" long sentences; I am so lucky to have had her wonderful support and presence in my life during the final stretch of the project.

My impetus to conduct this project comes in part from my own involvement with Muslimah Media Watch, a website and community to which I am so proud to belong. I am grateful to all of the MMW writers for inspiring me in this research. Particular thanks go to Tasnim Qutait, not only for stepping in as editor when I needed time away but also for her care and friendship during that time. Eren Cervantes-Altamirano and Shireen Ahmed also offered support and reassurance in so many ways.

I have been inspired while writing this dissertation by the work of local Muslim feminist activists. The Montreal Unity Mosque has been a particularly nourishing spiritual community, and I am especially grateful to my fellow co-founders Bariza Umar and Farah Kashem. I have learned so much from the dedicated and principled feminist engagement of Délice Mugabo, Leila Bdeir, Sarah Malik, and Leïla Benhadjoudja, among others. The Collective des féministes musulmanes du Québec provided an important base of solidarity and activism during a particularly difficult time to be a Muslim woman.

A number of people who may not have contributed directly to this dissertation but nonetheless deserve credit for helping hold me together during what was often a difficult process. My ongoing exchanges with Shazia Peer continue to remind me of hidden gifts, connections, and possibilities. Monique Woolnough unexpectedly reappeared in my life exactly when I needed her, and held me from afar as we talked about healing and resilience. Although my days as her Arabic student are long past, Seemi Ghazi continues to teach me about love and faith.

Friends from jazz classes at Cadance and tap classes at Klaxson – especially my fellow claquetteers, Rachel Santos and Nadine Benny – kept me moving and giggling when I was otherwise feeling isolated. Daïna Michaud of Cirquantique and other friends at aerial silks classes taught me to climb and helped me find strength and bravery.

My parents, Barb and Brian Riley, have given me love and support in more ways than I could ever count or thank them for.

There are so many people who contributed to this research in large and small ways, including those listed here and many I have not named. May the echoes of your insight and generosity continue to find their way back to you.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

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Glossary

Note: The bloggers and the scholarly sources that I cite within this text sometimes use words transliterated from Arabic. Where these words are quoted, I have kept the original spelling used by the author, although diacritical marks have been dropped from some academic quotes for ease of reading. Where the transliterations used by bloggers or scholars quoted in this dissertation have varied, I have included these varied spellings here. For ease of reading in English, most of these words have been pluralised in the text with an “s” on the end, even when the original Arabic plural takes a different structure.

Adhan: The Muslim call to prayer

Fatwa: A legal opinion, usually written by an Islamic scholar

Fatiha: The first chapter of the Qur’an, and a prayer in itself that is recited during the ritual prayer

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Fitra: The primordial state of the human, or the innate sense of truth, right, and wrong

Hadith: A saying of the Prophet Muhammad

Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca, considered to be obligatory on Muslims who have the means to make the journey

Halal/Halaal: Permitted according to Islamic jurisprudence; can also refer specifically to meat that has been slaughtered according to religiously prescribed methods

Haram/Haraam: Forbidden according to Islamic jurisprudence

Hijab: Literally “barrier”; usually referring to the headscarf worn by some Muslim women

Imam: The leader of the prayer

Juma: The communal prayer held during midday on Fridays, including a sermon and a *salat* ritual prayer

Khutba/Khutbah: Sermon

Kufr: Disbelief; also translated as ungratefulness

Mahr: An agreed-upon sum of money or other material gift given by the husband to the wife as part of the Islamic marriage contract

Masjid: Mosque

Mufti: A person who issues *fatwas* (legal opinions)

Niqab: A face-covering worn by some Muslim women

Qur'an: Literally, "The Recitation"; Islam's holy book, believed by Muslims to be God's word as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad

Salah/Salat: The Islamic ritual prayer, prescribed to be performed five times a day and consisting of specific movements and recitations

Shaikh: An Islamic scholar, usually designating someone with traditional religious training

Sharia/Shari'ah: Islamic law, in its idealised conception; also refers to legal codes informed by Islam in some contexts

Sunna/Sunnah: The traditional practices of the Prophet Muhammad

Tafsir: Islamic exegesis, often referring to particular methodologies for reading the Qur'an

Wudu: The ablution required in order to engage in the ritual *salah* prayer

Prefatory note

Many of the quotes found within this dissertation come from blogs and thus may include stylistic features (such as bold text or all-caps for emphasis) not ordinarily found in academic work. Unless otherwise indicated, all emphasis found in quotes from the blogs is from the original source. Spelling and punctuation have also been left as is.

Introduction

You don't need a fatwa to tell you that murder, rape, theft, lying, betraying trusts and harming innocent people is wrong. You don't need a fatwa to know that you are allowed to leave your house for any number of reasons or for no reason or at all. You don't need a fatwa to know that the way men abuse the authority they've been given to relegate women to inferior spaces in mosques is wrong. (Ify Okoye, 19 January 2011)

In the quote from which this dissertation draws its title, blogger Ify Okoye responds to a trend she has observed within her religious community, and particularly among women converts, in which scholarly opinions are sought for every single action, even “[crossing] the street” (Okoye, 19 January 2011). While she expresses respect for the intentions behind this inclination, and notes that she herself has fallen prey to it as well, she also writes that the constant appeal to male authority (more precisely, scholars from “certain parts of Arabia,” and never from “Nigeria or Malaysia or Indonesia or Sudan or even America”) has resulted in the silencing of strong female voices, and the marginalisation of women in religious spaces such as mosques. In response to the mentality she describes, Ify writes that “You don’t need a fatwa” – a scholar’s legal opinion – for every idea or action, and that there are some ideas one should be able to “discern through the use of your God-given critical thinking capacity.”

In contrast to a broader contemporary Muslim context in which questions of Islamic legal rulings have come to dominate understandings of what it means to be “Islamic” (S. Ahmed, 2016, pp. 530-351),¹ Ify makes her point through a different religious vocabulary. Along with crediting God for the “critical thinking capacity” of humans, Ify refers at the end of the post to the concept of “*fitra*,” which she translates as “human nature,” and can also be understood as an innate sense of right and wrong (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 300). Making religious interpretations based on what one knows to be true from experience and innate intellectual capacity rather than formal scholarship is framed here not as a rejection of religious methodologies but as a mobilisation and validation of a different set of religious methodologies and principles. In other words, Ify’s point is not that one’s actions need not be “Islamic”; rather, it is a challenge to the framework of what is designated as “Islamic” in the first place.

At the same time, I admit to using the opening quote in a somewhat deliberately provocative way. To take Ify’s “You don’t need a fatwa” as licence to eschew all fatwas in all situations would be to misread her point. Given other religious practices that Ify describes (for example, the ritual prayer, a practice whose correct performance has been ascertained largely through scholarly interpretations of various religious texts), we can safely assume that she in fact follows multiple fatwas on a daily basis. In fact, she has even cited one religious teacher’s scholarly opinion as part of an argument in *favour* of women claiming space in mosques (Okoye, 8 February 2010). Moreover, Ify’s call to prioritise personal knowledge and critical thinking over seeking out a scholar’s legal opinion can be read as

¹ As evident in the Works Cited (see p. 339), there are several writers cited in this dissertation with the last name “Ahmed,” including three with the same first initial. For ease of reading, unless otherwise specified, all citations of “S. Ahmed” in this dissertation refer to Shahab Ahmed’s (2016) book *What Is Islam?*

itself a kind of fatwa that she is issuing. Thus, the issue becomes not a blanket rejection of fatwas as a whole, but rather a question of the situations in which a fatwa is appropriate, and of who has authority to issue one. My argument in using the quote is not that Ify or any of the bloggers is arguing that “you [never] need a fatwa,” but rather that their blogs point to important questions about *when* one might need a fatwa, and from whom. The questions of gender, personal narratives, space, authority, interpretation, and tradition that arise in relation to this particular blog post will be explored at length as this dissertation unfolds.

These questions are not without personal investment, one that for me began several years ago. During the early days of summer of 2008, I received an email from a friend and former university instructor whose women’s studies class on gender and Islam I had taken the previous year. She was forwarding a message from Fatemeh Fakhraie, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Muslimah Media Watch (MMW), who was looking for more writers for her blog. Curious, I went to the website, where I found funny and intelligent critiques on a variety of representations of Muslim women in media and popular culture—critiques that sounded not unlike my own responses to similar representations. I reasoned that this might be one way of channelling my personal rants into a productive direction, and sent Fatemeh an email.

In the years that followed, I became a regular writer at Muslimah Media Watch, then Associate Editor, and eventually took over as Editor-in-Chief in the fall of 2011. My writing there has covered topics as diverse as Muslim women’s lingerie, Pink Hijab Day, bellydancing as cultural appropriation, and the Quebec Charter of Values. The blog, which currently includes approximately 15 writers from ten different countries, has been cited in a number of academic sources (Echchaibi, 2013; Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 287; Varisco, 2010,

p. 166; Hammer, 2013, p. 107) and mainstream media articles (“Lady Gaga’s ‘Burqa’ Fetish,” 2013; “Mutilated Afghan Girl,” 2010).

And yet, while I am immensely proud of the work that we do as a blog, what stands out to me is less the material we publish than the community we have built. Nabil Echchaibi (2013) writes that MMW “provides a much needed space of social solidarity which goes beyond the strictures of institutionalized and bounded discourse on gender and religion” (p. 858); this observation about the public image of the blog applies also to the private internal community of MMW bloggers. The MMW writers’ email list is frequently used by the writers not only to share articles of personal interest but also to vent and express solidarity on personal issues including marriage, divorce, death, and mental health. Semi-regular online video meetings through Google Hangouts have also allowed the writers to meet each other and even, where applicable, to introduce the group to their children and their cats. I have been fortunate to meet MMW writers and readers in person in four different countries. The investment of each writer in this project has created a context of personal and communal support that runs deep. The impact of writing about Islam and gender (among many other issues) seems, for many of us, to go far beyond an intellectual exercise, and to have profound implications on individual and community levels.

As a researcher in communication studies, I have found my academic curiosity piqued by some of these experiences. How does the internet – and blogs in particular – facilitate the creation of communities of Muslim women engaged in responding to the competing and sometimes contradictory discourses of Islamophobia, sexism, religious extremism, racism, and homophobia? What is the role of blogging for women who critically engage with these topics online, and for the people who read their posts? What are the

processes of religious interpretation produced through blogging practices? How does writing on blogs about one's personal experiences with religion and gender contribute to the ways women understand religious issues? This dissertation addresses these questions through an examination of four prominent blogs written by self-identified Muslim feminists. I look at the relationship between blogging and religious interpretation, bodies, divides between public and private, sacred space, and the boundaries of which topics are seen as acceptable and relevant for discussion. Using a narrative analysis approach to the stories told on the blogs (an approach I explain in more detail in Chapter 2), I examine blogging as a practice through which religious interpretations are developed. The investigation of this practice through the topics of menstruation, queer issues, and gendered prayer spaces offers insights into how the bloggers' personal stories challenge dominant discourses about women's bodies, construct online interpretive communities, and provide new perspectives on Muslim feminist work.

Muslim women in North America

For the purposes of this research, I have focused specifically on English-speaking women in Canada and the United States.² A quick demographic overview is warranted here. Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey counted slightly over one million Muslims living in Canada, making up 3.2% of Canada's population, with two-thirds of this population living in the metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2011). Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema, and Mark J. Goodman (2009) estimate that "Muslims in Canada originate from more than eighty-five nations and comprise dozens of ethno-racial and linguistic groups" (p. 84). The main ethnic groups vary significantly by

² A brief outline of the overall global context of Muslim blogs will be provided in Chapter 1.

province, with Quebec's Muslims coming mainly from North Africa, Ontario's from Pakistan, Somalia and Bangladesh, and western Canada's from Iran and Afghanistan, although there is significant diversity among Muslims in each of these regions (Adams, 2007, p. 8). South of the border, a 2016 estimate from the Pew Research Centre puts the number of Muslim in the United States at 3.3 million, and approximately 1% of the country's total population (Mohamed, 2016). Approximately 37% of the United States Muslim population was born in the United States, with the largest immigrant groups coming from Arab countries and from South Asia (Pew Research Centre, 2011).

While the internet does not easily lend itself to the drawing of strict geographic borders (and indeed, many non-North American perspectives also find their way into the blogs examined here, through comments left on the blogs or international activists cited by the writers), an emphasis on the North American perspective allows for some level of coherence and shared context in terms both of challenges that the bloggers I study face in their religious communities and of some of the academic sources and news events to which they are responding. While there is a large amount of Islamic scholarship published out of Muslim countries (for example, Al-Azhar University in Egypt) or countries with large and longstanding Muslim populations (such as preacher Zakir Naik, based in India) that circulates publicly around the world, there is also a growing amount of Islamic scholarship and education that is based in North America and geared towards local communities. Examples of these include AlMaghrib Institute, which has chapters across North America and around the world; Zaytuna College, based in Berkeley; and Seeker's Hub in the Toronto area. Reviving the Islamic Spirit, an annual convention in Toronto, draws Muslims from across North America to hear religious scholars from around the world. These examples, in

turn, shape an evolving definition of “Islamic tradition” rooted in the North American context, to which the bloggers in my study are responding.

With regard to Muslims living in countries where Muslims are a minority and Islamic law is absent from the civil legal code, Kecia Ali also points out that

The entirely voluntary nature of all types of religious observance means that the urgent questions for Muslims living under civil laws in North America and Europe in particular are ethical or moral rather than narrowly legal. At the same time, the fact that there are no putatively Islamic civil statutes involved means that those Muslims concerned with Islamic law tend to focus on ‘authentic’ texts, rather than national legal codes, making engagement with the tradition necessary. (Ali, 2006, pp. xxii-xxiii)

The location of Muslim feminist bloggers in Muslim-minority contexts (whether in North America or elsewhere) thus gives particular dimensions to the question of what it means for these women to interpret religious principles in relation to their everyday lives, bringing the focus to these women’s moral and ethical engagement with religious texts and traditions.³ Juliane Hammer (2012) notes that contemporary Muslim women’s activism in North America also comes at a time when a North American Muslim identity is in the process of being forged. In the context of the national culture, Muslims in Canada and the United States also find themselves in settler colonies where the presence of a sizable Muslim population dates only from the last half-century, further informing this process of identity formation.

³ This is in contrast, for example, to the work of Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008), whose analysis of Muslim women’s blogs in Iran is heavily shaped by their engagement with Iranian laws and social conventions; while the bloggers in my own study all encounter religious community norms of various kinds, the lack of state enforcement of such norms changes the stakes dramatically.

My focus on North America also puts the findings of this dissertation into conversation with work by Hammer (2012) and Aysha A. Hidayatullah (2014), whose recent studies on Muslim feminist work have also taken a predominantly North American focus. On the other hand, the degree to which the North American context produces Muslim feminist bloggers whose work is significantly different from bloggers based elsewhere – particularly, for example, in the United Kingdom or Australia – is uncertain, and would require a larger comparative study that is outside of the scope of this research. While the focus on North America reflects some degree of shared context, one that allows for a fruitful examination of overlapping conversations on gender issues in Islam, the imposition of borders is also acknowledged as somewhat artificial, given the lack of such borders online. The context that the bloggers do share is relevant, but this focus should not be taken to suggest that these are the only bloggers doing this work or that bloggers elsewhere are not responding to similar discourses.

Racism and sexism in the lives of Muslim women

Muslim women in North America, and in the West more generally, often find themselves caught in the middle of several competing discourses. Muslim women often experience Islamophobia and other forms of racism and xenophobia from mainstream society. Jasmin Zine (2008) defines “gendered Islamophobia” as the “specific forms of discrimination levelled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform specific individual and systemic forms of oppression” (p. 154).⁴ Along with interpersonal acts of verbal or physical violence against women

⁴ Although Zine’s terminology is useful and relevant here in considering forms of Islamophobia directed specifically at Muslim women, I also want to note that forms of Islamophobia that may not be typically framed

perceived to be Muslim, gendered Islamophobia is also reflected in workplace discrimination and at the policy level, as observed most recently in the case of the “Charter of Quebec Values,”⁵ proposed in 2013 (Bakali, 2015). Gendered Islamophobia further manifests itself in the infantilising of Muslim women through paternalistic discourses with long colonial histories that portray them as oppressed and in need of saving, even (or sometimes especially) by those who claim themselves to be feminist (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Razack, 2008).

Muslim women also find themselves confronting sexism and other forms of oppression within their families and religious communities (Cross, 2013). While it is sometimes difficult to talk about gendered violence within Muslim communities without reinforcing stereotypes about Muslims being inherently or uniquely violent or misogynistic, Muslim communities are, of course, not immune to sexism, and Muslim women do face forms of sexism that are justified using religious texts, whether this is inside the home (as depicted in the “Muslim Wheel of Domestic Violence”⁶), or within religious organisations or mosques. Zarqa Nawaz’s documentary *Me and the Mosque* (2005) documents some of the frustrations that Muslim women in Canada face when it comes to having adequate physical space and finding respect within public places of worship. Muslim women who are, for example, poor, disabled, elderly, queer, or transgender, represent a minority within a minority, and thus confront an increasingly tangled web of interlocking forms of oppression (Riley, 2011). Black Muslims often face racism within

as “gendered” in this definition – such as the fear of the dangerous Muslim terrorist – are often themselves linked to very gendered images of Muslim men.

⁵ The full name of the charter when it was proposed as a bill in Quebec’s National Assembly was the “Charter Affirming the Values of State Secularism and Religious Neutrality” (Bakali, 2015, p. 413).

⁶ See Sharifa Alkhateeb’s representation of the wheel, which looks at the number of dimensions in women’s lives where religious principles may be used to justify violence against them, here:

http://www.lfcc.on.ca/muslim_wheel_of_domestic_violence.html.

Muslim communities whose leadership is dominated by people (usually men) of Arab or South Asian background (Chan-Malik, 2009, p. 160).

Because of the racism and suspicion targeting Muslim communities, it sometimes becomes difficult for Muslim women to speak out against inequalities within their religious communities. From within Muslim communities, frank discussions in public forums about problems in relation to gender issues or other inequalities can draw the criticism that those who speak up are “airing dirty laundry,” and that these private internal matters should not become public discussions. Similar concerns have been documented within African-American and other minority communities, where those who speak publicly about sexism or violence face both internal risks of being accused of “race treason” and external risks of exposing the group as a whole to increased surveillance and oppression (Jiwani, 2006, p. 123). At the same time, discussions about religious communities or principles that are not seen as sufficiently condemnatory of violence or unequal power dynamics (or that express a concern about the potential for racist backlash against the community) can be dismissed by the wider society as apologetic: as signs of false consciousness or brainwashing, or as devious attempts to hide the “true” violent agenda of Muslims (Thobani, 2007, p. 237). Holding critical conversations about the gender dimensions of Muslim communities and Islamic texts thus brings certain risks and challenges that would not exist in a less public forum, or in a religious community facing less scrutiny from outsiders.

Muslim activism for gender justice

Despite the difficult and often fraught position in which they find themselves, Muslim women in North America continue to be active in claiming a space and voice for

themselves both within and outside Muslim communities. This dissertation focuses on writing and activism that locates itself as *feminist*: a term that is often contested, and that some women resist, often precisely because of the histories of Western feminist attempts to “save” Muslim women. For example, both Amina Wadud (2006, p. 79) and Asma Barlas (2008, p. 15), whose research has become canonical within Muslim feminist academic work, have expressed reluctance to call themselves feminists. Fatima Seedat (2013) has also pointed out that using “Islamic feminism” as a term may imply “a necessary single convergence” that is intellectually restrictive. Different researchers have worked with this discomfort with the term “feminism” in different ways. Hammer (2012) chooses to use the label only for those who self-identify as such (p. 58), while Hidayatullah (2014) opts to use the term more broadly to refer to any work (although not to individuals who disavow the identification) that “[uses] a set of analytical tools to criticize male power and normativity” (p. 44). All four of the bloggers who form the main focus of this dissertation do identify themselves as feminists, leaving me with no conflicts in describing them as such; following Hidayatullah, I also locate them within an intellectual tradition that can be named as feminist. Still, as I apply the term to the broader field with some hesitation, my intention is not to marginalise those who, like Wadud and Barlas, similarly engage in critical examinations of gender issues within Islamic frameworks, but who nonetheless avoid the “feminist” label.

In this dissertation, I argue that the online environment, and in particular the framework of the blog, plays a key role in shaping the format and content of discussions on religion and gender. At the same time, these online conversations are not happening in a vacuum. Critical work on Islam and gender can be found in a number of recent academic

publications, which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2, as well as within various activist projects and emerging alternative communities. One of the most well-known manifestations of community activism around gender issues was a much-publicised mixed-gender Friday prayer led by Dr. Amina Wadud in New York City in 2005, a controversial event that drew protests and condemnation from many Muslim leaders and communities in the United States and elsewhere, both before and after the prayer occurred. The bulk of the responses to the prayer, both supportive and opposed, were expressed online; they included articles, opinion pieces, satire, and religious edicts that appeared on a wide range of websites (Hammer, 2012, pp. 41-52). Hammer (2012) writes that the event drew some criticism for the role it came to play as a kind of media stunt, a role that Hammer largely attributes to organiser Asra Nomani (p. 19), and that Wadud (2006) herself later wrote about as a source of great discomfort for her (p. 248). Still, she also argues that the event prompted important debates about women's authority in Islam that have continued to grow and resonate ever since.

These feminist engagements can also be seen in the creation of events and grassroots physical community spaces that aim to provide alternatives to the power relations that dominate in many North American mosques. In the wake of the 2005 prayer led by Amina Wadud, groups such as the El-Tawhid Juma Circle, founded in Toronto in 2009 and now with branches in four other cities, began hosting regular Friday prayers where people of all genders could give the call to prayer, deliver the sermon, and lead the ritual prayer itself (El-Tawhid Juma Circle, n.d.). Also in Toronto, a group called Outburst, founded in 2011, hosts workshops, arts events, and community gatherings with the goal of “[building] community through art, education and research” for young Muslim women

(Outburst, n.d.). In Los Angeles, a women's-only mosque was created in 2015 as an alternate approach to developing a space where women's religious authority can be recognised and fostered. The group, which calls itself the Women's Mosque of America, held its first Friday prayer in a multi-faith place of worship (formerly a synagogue) in January 2015, and aims to continue the practice on a monthly basis (Street, 2015). A yearly retreat held in the United States that began in 2011 provides a space where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Muslims can come together and support each other (Wax & Kahn, 2013). In each of these cases, reinterpretations of gender issues within Islam are prompting Muslim activists to create different spaces and communities in which they can enact new kinds of personal and communal practice.

Muslim women's activism and self-expression are also reflected in an increasing body of autobiographical literature reflecting the lived experiences and struggles of North American Muslim women. Hammer (2012) writes about the emergence of English-language anthologies of Muslim women's personal stories, referring, for example, to Fauzia Afzal-Khan's edited collection *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (2005), Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur's *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* (2005), and Sarah Husain's *Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith, and Sexuality* (2006). To these, we can add the more recently published anthology *Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women*, edited by Ayesha Mattu and Nura Masnavi (2012). All of these collections privilege the voices and stories of Muslim women, particularly those living in North America, as they reflect on what it means to be a Muslim women in contexts influenced by Islamophobia, racism, homophobia, and sexism.

Blogging Muslim feminism

Given the broader context of Muslim feminist engagement in academia, literature, media, and other spheres, it is little surprise that the world of blogging has likewise seen writers take up issues of gender, identity, sexuality, and authority. The engagement of Muslim feminist bloggers with these topics often comes from both their own reading of religious texts as well as narratives of lived experience, in their private religious practice, within their families, or within larger Muslim community structures. As will be elaborated in more detail in Chapter 2, I argue that a number of components of blogging – such as the recounting of personal narratives; the ease with which one can share images, videos, and audio recordings; and the interactions that bloggers have with their audiences – come together to help shape a multifaceted public process of religious interpretation. An examination of Muslim feminist blogs in this way offers a look at some of the manifestations of the contemporary debates on Islam and gender issues as they take place online. It also points to the role of online media in providing new spaces for discussion, as well as new configurations of audiences and communities.

This dissertation focuses mainly on four blogs written by self-identified feminist Muslim women of different backgrounds who reside in four different North American cities. In an article on Muslim women and the notion of the “third space,” Shahnaz Khan (1998) explains her small sample size by writing that “the individual ‘case’ is also a point of entry into larger social and economic processes” (p. 463), a position informed by the work of Dorothy Smith (1987). Taking a similar feminist qualitative research approach, I use the four blogs featured in this dissertation as case studies through which to investigate how the writers engage with the social forces that shape their contexts, and specifically what this

looks like as it translates into online conversations about religion and gender. The use of case studies allows me to incorporate a variety of methods (in this case, focused on textual analysis as well as interviews) in order to examine individuals and communities in their context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). With such a small sample size – albeit one that provided me nearly 2000 blog posts to analyse – my aim here is clearly not to be representative in a quantitative sense of the full array of North American Muslim blogs. Instead, restricting my study to a relatively small number of blogs allowed me to focus in depth on each bloggers' engagement with specific topics and to place each blog in conversation with three others in order to account for the different strategies through which feminist work takes place on blogs. The process through which I arrived at the selection of the four blogs I ultimately used for this project, and their relationship to a broader landscape of Muslim blogs, is discussed at more length in Chapter 1.

As I elaborate in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2, my analysis of the four blogs comes mainly from reading through all blog posts and comments and also includes interviews with each writer. Ranging in age from mid twenties to mid thirties, with ethnic origins from Africa, Europe, and South Asia, representing both convert and non-convert backgrounds, and scattered across North America, these four bloggers illustrate the diversity of perspectives that can be found within the much larger ensemble of Muslim blogs as a whole.⁷ Along with the different backgrounds and experiences they represent, the blogs were also chosen based on their longevity and extensive content, as well as the

⁷ It should be acknowledged, however, that while not all of the bloggers currently identify themselves as Sunni, all come from Sunni backgrounds (whether this is a family background or the community into which they converted). Sunni Islam is still the implicit norm, and references to aspects central to Muslim life for other Muslim sects (such as the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husain for Shia Muslims) are noticeably absent. This bias informs much of the mainstream Muslim feminist academic literature as well, and the comments about "Islam" made throughout this dissertation should be understood as rooted within a heavily Sunni-dominant perspective.

activity of their readers in the comment sections. The writing on all four of the blogs is at turns thoughtful, angry, creative, and passionate, reflecting a wide range of topics linked to gender issues within Islam, as well as many other topics. These four blogs form a corpus from which I will be extracting three major themes – menstruation, queer issues, and women’s prayer spaces in mosques – that provide a fruitful landscape for considering the ways that narratives conveyed through blogging form part of a process of religious interpretation. They also offer examples for how blogging is contributing to the ongoing development of Muslim feminist thought.

A brief introduction to each of the blogs is provided below. Each of the bloggers is referred to throughout the dissertation primarily by her first name, as a reflection of the ways that they use their own names and others’ when writing and commenting online; their posts are cited according to the screen names attached to their published writing.

wood turtle

Written by Kirstin S. Dane, a Toronto-based woman in her thirties, wood turtle (<http://woodturtle.wordpress.com>) is a blog that looks at a wide range of religion-related issues, as well as the blogger’s experiences parenting her young children, daughters Eryn and Ivy, and son Quinn (the children’s names are pseudonyms).⁸

On the blog’s “About” page (wood turtle, n.d.), Kirstin describes herself as “a believing Muslim, a woman and a feminist,” which she explains as indicating that “I believe in the [tenets] of Islam, I am concerned with issues affecting women in relation to my religion, world culture and in general — and I believe that much of religion has been

⁸ Quinn was born in the fall of 2015, so most of Kirstin’s posts about parenting up to this point are about her daughters.

interpreted, written, commanded, used, abused, and seen through the male lens” (wood turtle, n.d.). Kirstin’s blog is a mix of personal stories, religious reflections, creative writing, photo blogging (including a recurring “Monday moments” feature, usually focused on pictures of her daughters), book reviews (often including a giveaway, where readers can leave a comment for a chance to win a copy of the book⁹), and lists of links to recommended posts or articles of interest elsewhere on the internet.

When I interviewed her in December 2013, Kirstin explained that she started blogging after having her first daughter. At the time, she felt that many within her community, particularly the women, saw her only as a mother, and no longer engaged her on questions related to other issues within the Muslim community. The first posts on the blog actually date back to January 2009, eight months before Kirstin’s daughter was born, but the posts were very sparse until May 2010, after which time her posting became much more active and regular. Kirstin explained her decision to blog partly as a natural progression from other online writing she had done many years before. Her turn to blogging was partly a practical form of activism as a young working mother with a full and sometimes unpredictable schedule, and partly a way to reach a greater number of people than she felt able to reach in her local Muslim community, where she felt that her opinions as a woman were not always valued and where she was feeling increasingly alienated and “unmosqued.”¹⁰

⁹ For some of the giveaways, it appears to be Kirstin herself providing the book; other times, copies of the book have been provided to her by the author or publisher for her to give away.

¹⁰ This term has become more widely used after the production of a documentary entitled *Unmosqued* in 2014, which explored the reasons that young Muslims in the United States are becoming increasingly alienated from mosque communities (Aly & Eid, 2014). The topic of mosque spaces will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

On the blog, Kirstin explains that she chose the name “wood turtle” because of a wooden turtle figurine that made her daughter Eryn laugh (wood turtle, n.d.). In the interview, she elaborated that she also chose the name because it had no other political or social connotations, allowing her to define herself in a way that did not require aligning herself with particular religious or other perspectives: “without Islamic baggage, religious baggage, mommy baggage.” Although she asked that her real name be used in this research project, her name does not appear anywhere on her blog; she occasionally refers to herself as “K,” but otherwise identifies herself on her blog and on social media as “wood turtle.”

Many of the posts on wood turtle reflect Kirstin’s evolution as a Muslim and as a feminist over the years. She has written about having experienced the enthusiasm of “the throes of convertitis” when she first became Muslim in her early twenties, and notes that as time went on, her beliefs, practices, and community involvement shifted. She came to challenge certain interpretations that she initially had seen as non-negotiable, such as the need to wear very loose clothing and avoid bright colours, or a commitment to very strict gender segregation (wood turtle, 30 May 2010). In blog posts on menstruation, women’s mosque spaces, headscarves, mixed-gender interactions, and many other issues, Kirstin challenges and reinterprets some of the norms that she encounters online and in person. Nonetheless, she described herself to me in the interview as “risk-averse,” particularly in relation to her readers, and she indicated that there are certain issues – for example, women-led mixed prayers and Islam’s position on queer sexualities – that she would like to write about but had so far hesitated to discuss in much depth out of fear of alienating some

of her more “conservative” readers.¹¹ Perhaps because of this, the comment sections on wood turtle’s posts, for the most part, take a positive tone. Kirstin’s responses to comments that disagree with her are cordial and conciliatory, and she also receives a large number of comments from readers who agree with her and express gratitude that she has publicly shared her perspective. Comments on a post about trying to juggle breastfeeding logistics and religious demands regarding modest clothing, for example, include one who thanks her “for such a heartfelt rant” (Savvy yah, 4 December 2012) and another who thanks her “for sharing with such honesty” (Hana, 4 December 2012).

The most active period of posting on wood turtle was from 2010-2012, and the writing has largely tapered off, with only occasional posts since late 2013. In a May 2014 post, Kirstin apologised to her readers for her unannounced silence, explaining that, along with feeling generally “overwhelmed with social media,” she had been dealing with other forms of upheaval. As she explains, “we had a really drawn out winter. We moved. I took on a new position at work. I’m feeling even more disconnected from the Muslim community. I don’t feel like myself. There was change everywhere” (wood turtle, 12 May 2014). A month and a half later, as Ramadan began, she wrote about struggling with her “religious self esteem” and her sense of Muslim identity (wood turtle, 2 July 2014).

Although Kirstin does not clearly state on the blog why she has stopped writing (or, for that matter, whether she has stopped entirely), one element that she mentioned in the interview may also come into play with regard to her posts on the topic of motherhood. Kirstin noted that, in her experience, most “mommy blogs” seem to be written by mothers

¹¹ This characterisation reflects Kirstin’s own impression of her readers’ perspectives, likely arrived at through a combination of reading the comments her readers leave and knowing some of her readers in person, although it is difficult to know how many of her readers actually fit within this “conservative” category.

of young children. She expressed uncertainty about how her own writing would evolve as her children got older, both because she was not sure if audiences would still be as interested in reading about older children, and because her own children might start asking her not to write publicly about them. The explanations that Kirstin offers for blogging less frequently seem to be related to a more complicated mix of circumstances; however, her comments about her specific relationship to mommy blogging reflect some of the implicit expectations that bloggers may face in terms of their content and perspective.

the fatal feminist

The Fatal Feminist (<http://thefatalfeminist.com/>) is a blog written by Nahida Sultana Nisa, a Muslim woman living in the San Francisco Bay Area who began her blog in 2011 at the age of 19. The blog's sidebar describes it as "a declaration of jihad on the cultural oppression of Muslim women," and the blog focuses mainly on gender issues within a Muslim context, although Nahida also writes about other social issues such as sexism, sexualisation, racism, United States politics, and lighter topics such as makeup, jewelry, and bras. The blog includes a series of posts on "Quranic Verses and Misconceptions," in which Nahida looks at the context and translation of verses on issues such as polygamy, inheritance laws, and domestic violence, providing interpretations of these verses that challenge dominant patriarchal understandings (the fatal feminist, n.d.a). Another series of posts, "Women in Islamic History," looks at women throughout history – beginning with pre-Islamic women such as Eve (the first woman) and Aasiya (the wife of Pharaoh), continuing with women from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and also looking at women such as Rabia al-Adawiyya, who lived in the eighth century CE – and aims

to draw attention to stories that are often incomplete or not told at all in many Muslim communities (the fatal feminist, n.d.b). In my interview with her, Nahida explained the impetus for the history section as follows:

I think it's important to feel that you're represented in your religious history.

And one of the things that really sort of got on my nerves when I was attending the mosque regularly and I was part of my community was that I would often hear stories of these women who were very argumentative and were very... they weren't the kind of women that we were taught to be, and yet they were held to this incredible level, and we were supposed to be like them, but when we acted as they did, and when we questioned what we were being taught, it wasn't welcome. And so that discrepancy between the ideal and the reaction we would receive when we were trying to become it was very strange to me, and it was something that needed to be called out.

The Fatal Feminist began in January 2011, and Nahida explained to me in an interview in January 2014 that she had begun blogging at a time in her life when the "mainstream interpretation" of Islam she was encountering, as she put it, "just didn't sit well with me, with my own moral compass and my own sort of personality, and I needed a way to reconcile that with myself, and I needed – it was almost a way of justifying remaining in the religion." She further told me: "I started the blog as a way to just sort of organise my thoughts and my interpretations and my arguments, and it ended up being a place to hear from other people and their ideas," adding that she did not expect to have as many readers and comments as she has received.

Nahida uses her full name on her blog, and has never used a pseudonym. While she understands the decisions of some bloggers to remain anonymous, she writes under her real name because, as she put it in my interview with her, “I’m kind of just used to owning up to what I say,” and “I wanted to believe in what I was writing enough to put my name on it.” Nahida’s tone ranges from serious to playful to snarky, often with a high degree of sarcasm, colourful language, and little tolerance for anyone unwilling to consider her perspective. In one post responding to male policing of Muslim women’s hair and clothing, she writes:

A message to Muslim men:

Shut the fuck up.

That is the shortest entry you will ever see here on Islamic studies. This is because there is nothing to study or analyze. **There is absolutely no question that my body is none of your business.** (the fatal feminist, 25 January 2011)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the comment section at The Fatal Feminist is often much more heated than the one at wood turtle. Many of Nahida’s posts attract angry or indignant responses from Muslims who disagree with her interpretations, and occasionally also from non-Muslims expressing their disgust with Islam, and Nahida is often scathing in her rebuttals. At the same time, many other commenters are very supportive and, as with wood turtle, thank her for writing on issues that tend to be ignored or represented only in limited ways.

The playful tone of much of Nahida’s blogging is captured, for example, in a blog post she wrote about mermaids. Linking to an article on a website related to questions and answers about Islamic jurisprudence where someone had written in asking about whether

it was *halal* (permitted) to eat mermaids,¹² Nahida expresses mock outrage at the suggestion that mermaids may be considered *halal*, writing that “Anyone who would ever **eat a mermaid** EVER is excommunicated from my blog,” which she follows with “This is not funny, people. Stop snickering! I am shocked and horrified” (the fatal feminist, 25 June 2011). Later in the post, she discusses another article claiming that it is impermissible to give salaams (the Islamic greeting of peace) to a parrot, and eventually she issues her own fatwa (religious edict) that “You may not eat a mermaid, and you must say salaam to parrots.”

Readers were quick to join in the discussion. Regular commenter Ozymandias wrote in response to Nahida’s post that “I am totally becoming a Muslim now. You guys are prepared for EVERYTHING. :)” (Ozymandias, 25 June 2011). Other commenters joined in the debate, speculating on mermaids being tasty and under what conditions they would eat them. Over time, the mermaid theme became something of a running inside joke within the blog. When Nahida published a post called “The Compassion Principle,” in which she attempted to articulate an ethic of compassion as the driving force in her actions and beliefs, a reader asked “so does this mean i [sic] really can't eat mermaids?” (aziza, 19 July 2011). On a post titled “Things That Are Supposed to Make Me a Bad Muslim,” Nahida lists supposedly rebellious or sacrilegious practices such as “Telling the imam he is wrong” and “Matching my bra straps with my lipgloss” – and also mentions “Refusing to eat mermaids,” with a hyperlink back to the original post (the fatal feminist, 26 July 2011). One

¹² The link that Nahida provides to the source of the discussion and ruling is no longer active, but a Google search for the quote she gives leads to another blog that appears to have copied and pasted the same fatwa (Ryder, 2007). The response to the question about whether mermaids are *halal* to eat considers the perspectives of the four major Sunni schools to determine whether mermaids fall under the category of “sea animals,” which would make them therefore Islamically lawful to eat.

commenter on another post suggested that mermaids should be part of the blog's tagline (Flint, 7 September 2011), which Nahida then adopted; the tagline on the top right of the blog now reads, as per the suggestion, "Islam. Feminism. Mermaids." The ongoing mermaid discussion reflects not only a creative engagement with jurisprudence and ethics, but also an ongoing inside joke that has contributed to a sense of community among some of the readers of The Fatal Feminist.

Nahida told me that, "in terms of the physical world" blogging has made her "a stronger, more active person," and told me about an experience when she was teaching a children's Sunday school class at a mosque that has a barrier:

For a while I taught two periods, and *dhuhr* [noon] prayer was considered a part of class. And so, one day instead of... separating the female students from the male students, I just took all of the students, and I took them in front of the barrier, and I refused to move. And I only did that once, because that was my last day. I think that's kind of why I did it, because I would have to face consequences. But I – it's not something I would have bothered with if I hadn't been blogging online. And so that sort of – it sort of affects how I exist in both spheres.

Nahida also told me about how blogging has made her feel more confident in speaking up for herself in person, noting that at earlier times, upon hearing a religious teacher say something sexist or offensive, "I wouldn't say anything. But now I do. I tend to say something." In this way, while Nahida's offline life provides material for her online writing, her activities online also influence the ways that she acts in her local world. This is an issue I will address at greater length in Chapter 5.

Freedom from the Forbidden

Freedom from the Forbidden (<https://orbala.wordpress.com/>)¹³ is a blog written by Shehnaz Haqqani, a U.S.-based PhD student in her late twenties who writes under the pseudonym “Orbala.” A Pashtun born in Pakistan’s Swat Valley who came to the United States at the age of twelve, Shehnaz writes extensively about Pashtun culture and identity, posting Pashto songs and poetry, a series of profiles of famous Pashtuns, and more critical posts about Pashtun cultural conceptions of gender and honour. Interestingly, she notes that this engagement with all things Pashtun is relatively recent. As a 2009 blog post explains,

A few months ago, or actually a year ago, **I would not have seen myself as a Pashtun woman because I denied myself this ethnic title of mine**, this blood.

But as I learned, read, and pondered over my history and culture and people, I realized I had nothing to run away from and that the problems that my people are facing can only be solved by those who realize and understand them and plot practical solutions for them; running away from them and denying my own identity was not the solution to anything but would only keep me a confused woman for the rest of my life, until I accepted who I was. (Orbala, 3 June 2009)

Shehnaz told me in her interview that she sometimes felt tired of “this huge burden on us [bloggers] to represent everyone” but nonetheless felt compelled to address misconceptions about Pashtun culture and highlight both positive and negative aspects of it.

¹³ Shehnaz switched to the Wordpress server in November 2014. While all of her new content is at the Wordpress URL, and some of her earlier posts have also been moved to Wordpress, much of her blog is still at her old URL, <http://orbala.blogspot.ca/>.

Religious topics, especially those linked to questions of gender and sexuality, also feature prominently on this blog, including analyses of sacred texts and debates on social media about religious issues. One of her most popular posts, for example, analyses a series of images posted on Facebook and elsewhere on the internet that, as she argues, promote wearing the headscarf by shaming women who do not wear it (Orbala, 1 November 2014). The blog also contains Shehnaz's creative writing, mainly poetry; travel diaries from her Arabic-language study trips to Jordan, Morocco, and Oman; and many pictures, videos, and quotes from her young niece Kashmala.

Shehnaz's path to blogging came out of an earlier online engagement with *Yahoo! 360°*, an early (now-defunct) social network and blogging platform linked with *Yahoo! Answers* that was active from 2005-2008. Shehnaz told me that she had been particularly engaged with *Yahoo! 360°* around 2006. She would go online to correct Islamophobic statements and misconceptions about Islam, as well as to refute Muslims who expressed views contradicting her own: both those whose opinions she found misogynistic and those who she felt did not understand Islam strictly enough. *Yahoo! 360°* eventually shut down in 2008, which left Shehnaz frustrated to have lost this outlet for expressing herself online, and eventually she started her own blog in 2009.

Shehnaz also described to me the evolution of the religious ideas that informed the perspective that she came to take once she began blogging. She characterised her family as "extremely conservative" (which she attributed in part to their experience as immigrants in the United States), and noted that this was a perspective that she once shared. In my interview with her in February 2014, Shehnaz explained that her perspectives on many religious issues had changed drastically. She described these shifts as closely linked to her

initial admiration of, and then disillusionment with, the popular Indian Islamic teacher Zakir Naik, whose articles and talks, mainly in English, are widely available online.¹⁴ Shehnaz once followed Naik's teachings closely and much admired him as a teacher, praying that he would one day become the President of India, and wishing that she "could be his wife." Yet as she listened to him more, she began to note what she saw as "hypocrisy" in his work, and to find him "extremely anti-Muslim and extremely anti-women." This, combined with her women's studies classes and friends who questioned her ideas, prompted a change in her overall religious stance and led her to feel "okay" (her word) with a greater variety of opinions.

Shehnaz initially began blogging under the pseudonym "Qrratugai," from "a Pashto term for someone who talks too much," with the suffix -gai added as a diminutive (Orbala, n.d.). As time went on, however, Shehnaz began to feel that the name was preventing people from taking her seriously. She explained to me that the term comes across as funny and immature, and thus "nothing that's worth... paying attention to." While she still translates and explains the name Qrratugai on her blog's "About" page, she now blogs as "Orbala," which is the word for "firefly" in some Pashto dialects, chosen because she "[loves] what the firefly symbolizes": "fire, lit, light -> passion -> anger (for all things unjust), and so on" (Orbala, n.d.). At the time I first interviewed her, Shehnaz was very careful about not having her first name anywhere that it could be publicly associated with her blog. She told me in the interview that she would find it "liberating" to use her real name with her online writing, but that she refrained from doing so due to previous reactions to her writing within the Pashtun community, in particular by men who seemed

¹⁴ Naik's YouTube channel can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/Drzakirchannel>. His Facebook fan page, <https://www.facebook.com/zakirnaik/>, has over 10 million likes.

to feel that her public expression online made her open to their suggestive comments and harassment. She also noted that she was concerned about the ramifications for her family if her name were to become publicly connected to her writing. Shehnaz was vocal in her frustration both with the situation that prevented her from feeling comfortable writing openly under her own name, and with Muslim feminists who took a blasé attitude to her concerns about the implications of using her real name, without acknowledging the choice she is making as a legitimate response to her own circumstances.

More recently, however, Shehnaz has become more comfortable associating her name with her blog. She told me in a follow-up interview in April 2016 that she had been thinking about using her first name, or even her full name, on her blog. She mentioned that although some of her early hesitations were related to her parents' possible reactions, she and her parents have both shifted; Shehnaz is less concerned about their opinions on her blogging, and they are more accepting of the ways that she expresses herself publicly. Interestingly, one of her main reasons now for hesitating to use her full name on her blog comes as a result of advice from academic colleagues who have suggested that having so much personal and informal writing easily available through a Google search could make it harder for her to find a job.

In early 2015, Shehnaz began writing more frankly about some of the ways she censors herself out of fears of how her community or her family might react. In a post entitled "The Privilege of Sexy Talk – and the expectation to remain faceless on Pashtun social media," Shehnaz explains that she believes "that to be able to write about anything you want, including sexy topics, is to enjoy a certain privilege not all people have," and that due to cultural taboos around modesty and her awareness that many Pashtuns read her

blog, she is not yet ready to write about topics such as sexuality or menstruation (Orbala, 19 March 2015). To what seems like her own surprise (she notes on her blog that she had “no intentions of writing about menstruation any time soon on [her] blog”), she followed up only nine days later with a post that discusses menstruation, breastfeeding, and policing of women’s bodies (Orbala, 28 March 2015). As Shehnaz’s blogging experiences demonstrates, the boundaries bloggers draw around the information that they share publicly (and the reasons for these boundaries) can shift over time, shaped in part by the ways that their ideas progress through the online writing they do.

Ify Okoye

The final blog in this study is written by Ify Okoye (<http://ifyokoye.com/>), an American woman of Nigerian background in her early thirties, living in the Washington, DC area. Ify identifies herself on the blog as “A nurse, reader, budding photographer, recovering news junkie, and trivia buff. Liberaldox, a writer and an activist with a passion for justice” (Okoye, n.d.a). She began blogging in 2006 when she read blogs by Muslim scholars her friends had recommended, which compelled her to start her own blog. Although she had written in private physical diaries throughout her life, she found the format of blogging more attractive than paper journals because it was easier to search through and was a more practical fit with the time she spent on the computer in other aspects of her life. While she described the interactive dimension of blogging as often “humbling and nice,” particularly when people react positively to her writing, she also characterised it as “weird,” and noted that she is often embarrassed to encounter people offline who tell her that they read her work. Despite her audience, she still experiences

writing largely as “a very individual, solitary thing,” a perception that gets challenged when she encounters people who read her postings.

Of the four blogs examined here, Ify’s is by far the longest-running (although posting has been very sparse in recent years), and also reflects particularly dramatic shifts in religious perspective over the years. Ify’s early blog entries were mostly focused on sharing short pieces of religious wisdom. The first months of the blog consisted largely of short “gems,” inspirational or thought-provoking quotes taken mainly from Islamic texts or well-known religious figures, and of re-posted articles of religious or political interest to Muslim communities in the United States. For a long time, Ify was actively involved with AlMaghrib Institute, an organisation founded in the United States that provides English-language Islamic seminars, usually over one or two weekends, to Western Muslim audiences, and that is known for its “orthodox” views, often associated with Salafi interpretations of Islam (Elliott, 2011). Many of Ify’s posts from her first years of blogging, especially from 2006-2009 but continuing through to 2011, incorporated reflections from her AlMaghrib classes. Ify was also involved from 2010-2011 as writer and editor at Muslim Matters, a group blog whose writing team includes some of the same teachers found at AlMaghrib Institute.¹⁵ Ify initially began blogging under the pseudonym “Muslim Apple,” but switched to writing under her own name in 2010. In a post explaining the change, Ify wrote that “I’m at a point where I’m comfortable in my name, which I had to reclaim along with other parts of my identity, some still left to reclaim” (Okoye, 14 October 2010). In other posts, Ify has written about the pressure she had experienced to adopt a

¹⁵ The Muslim Matters “Meet the Team” page, found at <http://muslimmatters.org/meet-the-team/>, includes AlMaghrib Dean of Academic Affairs Yasir Qadhi as an “Advisor,” and AlMaghrib Vice-President Waleed Basyouni as a contributor.

“Muslim name” when she first converted to Islam at age 18, and for many years she did indeed take on an Arabic name, Zainab, which she no longer uses (Okoye, 6 June 2009). This reference to reclaiming her birth name resonates not only with the idea of no longer being anonymous, but also with her move to reassert her ability to be Muslim as Ify, without having to use a different name.

As time went on, Ify became increasingly vocal on her blog with regard to the place of women – in terms of both physical spaces and the recognition of women’s voices and contributions – within mosques and classes, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. An article originally published on Muslim Matters, in which Ify refers to women’s prayer spaces as the “penalty box,” drew widespread attention and debate, eliciting 382 comments, both supportive and hostile (Okoye, 8 February 2010). Shortly after the publication of that post, Ify also created a parallel photo blog called “Oursides” (<https://oursides.wordpress.com/>), dedicated to visually documenting women’s prayer spaces (and, where possible, images of men’s spaces in the same mosque, to illustrate the contrast). Oursides was intended not only as an activist project to promote change, but also, on a more basic level, as a way of conveying to men a visual account of the conditions of women’s prayer spaces.¹⁶ Later in 2010, Ify was among a group of women in the Washington, DC area who began a “pray-in” movement, which involved going to local mosques and praying in the men’s section. Although she describes the group’s activities as peaceful and non-confrontational, the actions drew such resistance from some within the mosques that police were called on at least two occasions in two different mosques (Muslim Link Staff, 3 June 2010) as a way of forcing the women to leave (Okoye, 8 June 2010). On the blog, Ify writes not only about the

¹⁶ Ify’s use of the photo blog to draw attention to women’s prayer spaces will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

movement itself but also about the ensuing media reactions, responding to the controversy that had arisen and correcting some of the misinformation that had been published (Okoye, 11 July 2011).

In August of 2012, Ify published a blog post in which, to the surprise of many of her readers, she came out as gay (Okoye, 21 August 2012). When I asked her about this post, she explained that her decision to publish it was shaped by many factors, including a conversation with a friend and a homophobic sermon that she had heard at her mosque. As she put it to me in an interview in March 2014, “I was thinking, maybe hiding, pretending not to be gay, to make things easier for me, which it really didn’t even [do], is also doing a disservice, right? It does such a disservice to our community, because we can continue to perpetuate the myth that there are no gay people here.” Her interview echoes the claim in her post, in which she writes that, “Perpetually living in a state of anxiety and fear is an awfully heavy burden to carry alone and a diminished way of experiencing the world. I’ve learned that hiding the truth about an integral part of myself leads to dishonesty.” The post concludes with a description of the gradual process of learning, growing, and gaining acceptance, and a note that “I am not giving up on my faith” (Okoye, 21 August 2012). The post attracted 85 comments, ranging from the highly critical to the very supportive. Ify told me that she also received “a lot” of responses by email, both from those who vehemently disagreed with her as well as from readers and friends who expressed support and admiration of her for speaking publicly about this issue.

Ify has published only four posts since her coming-out post in 2012, and all but one of those have focused on queer issues. She tries to clarify her position for those who remain resistant to hearing it (14 February 2014), and to provide advice for queer Muslims

and allies who may come across her blog (1 April 2013; 14 November 2014). She explained her recent relative inactivity as the result of a sense of being “in flux,” having moved from a place where a lot of her writing was very “black and white” to a more complicated position on many issues, explaining that now, “it’s hard for me to... take those definitive positions.” As will be discussed in Chapter 2, this is a shift that several bloggers have experienced, and one that seems to have an impact on the content and frequency of their posts.

Outline of the dissertation

In order to examine these blogs as online sites of Muslim feminist religious interpretations, this dissertation can be understood as comprising two sections. The first section contains two chapters that lay the groundwork for theorising and studying these blogs. In Chapter 1, I begin by outlining literature on the public sphere and counterpublics, as well as literature on alternative media. I then discuss blogs specifically, with particular attention to how they relate to some important theoretical issues within public sphere and alternative media research, including divisions between public and private, questions of self-disclosure and anonymity, and the different shapes that audiences and communities may take in response to a blog. After providing an overview of some of the relevant research on religion and media, particularly with regard to online media, I then move to look in more depth at the world of Muslim blogs, and provide an introductory portrait of some of the characteristics of the blogs featured in this project.

In Chapter 2, I begin with a brief look at histories and methodologies of Islamic religious interpretation and knowledge production, with particular attention to the role of

gender therein. I use Sa'diyya Shaikh's (2007) notion of "*tafsir* through praxis" – a lens through which she considers Muslim women's lived experiences as sources of religious interpretation – to argue that we should look also at "*tafsir* through blogging." In using this term, I argue that blogging shapes the development of religious interpretation online in a number of ways: as a genre in which personal narrative is often a central feature; as a space to work through textual reinterpretations; as a format in which ideas can be published in short posts without always having to be explicitly connected to each other, allowing for a range of ideas to be expressed together; as a platform in which it is easy to share images, videos, and audio recordings that bolster a particular argument; as a public forum for discussion and debate with an audience of readers; and as a means through which writers may work to cultivate particular religious sensibilities. I highlight some tools from the field of narrative analysis in order to draw attention to the importance of looking at themes and performative dimensions of narratives as they appear throughout this dissertation. I also discuss the context of Islamophobia in which these Muslim feminists conduct their work. I end Chapter 2 with a concluding commentary about why the headscarf, while relevant to many of my questions, is not a topic of focus within this dissertation.

In the second section of the dissertation, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take a thematic approach to examining *tafsir* through blogging more closely in relation to specific topics. In Chapters 3 and 4, the focus is largely on the individual blogs and bloggers, as they challenge religious and cultural norms around menstruation and queer issues, respectively. In Chapter 3, my examination of the bloggers' discussion of menstruation begins with a look at how the writers use the public space of their blogs to challenge expectations that experiences of menstruation should be kept private. I also look at how the bloggers

respond to legal discourses that focus on regulating which behaviours are permitted, praised, discouraged, or forbidden, not necessarily by disagreeing with the rulings themselves, but by challenging the ways that the language used in expressing this legal reasoning sometimes serves to paint menstruating bodies as dirty or deficient. The chapter ends by acknowledging the reasons some bloggers may have for avoiding public discussions of topics such as menstruation, noting that public performances of discussions that can seem risqué should not be seen as the only path to feminist liberation.

Chapter 4, which considers the bloggers' approaches to queer issues, looks at how the bloggers use their writing to point to the limitations of dominant Muslim discourses on queer sexualities and relationships. Through a range of strategies involving personal narratives and textual reading, the bloggers argue for a different approach to queer relationships and to queer people. They call into question the central focus on legal issues prevalent within contemporary Muslim communities, pointing to how the focus within Islamic law on regulating particular sexual acts, often used as proof that "homosexuality is forbidden," does not map out neatly onto the complexity of human relationships. They also challenge the perception that legal permissibility should be the only relevant "Islamic" consideration, pointing as well to religious principles including love and compassion. Thus, the bloggers' work points to how Muslim feminist bloggers are engaging with Islamic principles in ways that depart from some of the text-based strategies used by Muslim feminists in earlier contexts.

In Chapter 5, I turn to the collective dimension of *tafsir* through blogging. Looking at blog posts and comments related to women's prayer spaces in mosques, I interrogate the ways that personal narratives invite responses and thus build connections and

communities, a role that may be especially poignant given the exclusion that many of the bloggers and their readers feel from local, physical religious spaces. Further, I investigate what happens when discussions about experiences in physical and very explicitly localised spaces are brought online into the globally-accessible space of the internet. In most cases, these online discussions occur among people who share similar experiences even as they have never occupied the same physical spaces as each other. This chapter investigates what such situations demonstrate about the complexity (and artificiality) of the online/offline divide, as well as the role the internet can play in building alternative religious communities. I also look at blogs as fertile ground for the collective imagining of new physical mosques and religious centres.

The dissertation concludes with some general remarks on the contributions that an analysis of *tafsir* through blogging makes to research on online media and on gender and Islam. In particular, I raise questions about what a focus on *tafsir* through blogging may mean for who is and is not represented among Muslim women and Muslim feminists. I also ask how the framework established in this dissertation might be applied to other religious bloggers. I conclude by considering what the format of blogging means for questions of authority and legitimacy among Muslim feminists, suggesting that for these women writers, whose ideas and online writing styles may be seen as far outside of the religious mainstream, blogging provides them an alternate avenue for establishing legitimacy as participants in public conversations about gender and Islam.

Chapter 1: Situating Muslim Feminist Bloggers in the Public Sphere

Muslim feminist bloggers in North America sit in a complicated relationship with the notion of the public sphere. Muslim women as a group are often very visible in media and public discussions, often painted as oppressed victims in need of liberation, and used as political symbols to justify wars overseas (Abu-Lughod, 2013) or domestic legislation about religious clothing (Bakali, 2015). Discourses from some (although certainly not all) Muslim religious perspectives suggest that women should not have too big a public role, and that the best places for women are private spaces such as the home (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 235). In both cases, Muslim women may be widely talked about, even as they are often assumed not to be present as active participants in these same discussions, thus becoming both hyper-visible and silenced. Blogging is one way that some Muslim women insert themselves into public conversations and claim a place for their stories.

In looking at blogs by members of marginalised groups as media interventions into public conversations, this dissertation draws heavily from literature on the public sphere (including critiques of the public sphere and theories on counterpublics), putting this into conversation with research on alternative media. After briefly outlining these two fields, this chapter looks at the definition of blogging more generally, considering how personal blogging as a form of alternative media offers a fertile ground for examining a number of elements: challenges to conventional understandings of public and private; the potential for online media creation to build communities; the implications of anonymity and self-disclosure on the internet; and the links between blogging and research on women's writing. Following this, I look at the field of media and religion, in particular online media

and their role in the development and transformation of religious communities and practices. The last part of this chapter provides an overview of the contemporary Muslim blogging landscape, as well as some preliminary comments from my findings about Muslim women's blogs in North America, and about the four blogs that are the focus of this dissertation.

Public sphere and counterpublics

Building on Jürgen Habermas' (1991) writing on the topic, Fraser (1990) defines the public sphere as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs" (p. 57). Summarising the Habermasian definition, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (2011) describe the public sphere as "an indefinitely open space in which all reasons could be expressed and heard," where power rests in "the coercion of rational deliberation," separate from the coercion of the state, (p. 3). Michael Warner (2002) characterises the public as "a space of discourse" that comes into existence "*by virtue of being addressed*" (p. 50; emphasis in original) and as "a relation among strangers" (p. 55) that is "contingent on its members' activity," rather than existing as a pre-existing group or category of people (p. 61). Although the public sphere has traditionally privileged discourse and thus language and rationality, Annelies Moors (2006) points out that public spheres are also sites of "of other forms of communication, such as comportment, body language, and styles of dress" (p. 116).

Although Habermas imagined an ideal public sphere as unitary and as a space where differences would be put aside in order for participants to engage as equals, Nancy Fraser

(1990; 1995) offers important critiques of this vision. She notes that the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth-century salon culture that Habermas describes was accessible only to a certain segment of the population, and that multiple publics have always existed, often separated by gender and social location (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Fraser further affirms not only the existence but also the value of “counterpublics” as spaces separate from the dominant public sphere, where alternate discourses can develop and circulate (p. 67). She argues that such counterpublics serve to build a more democratic and egalitarian society, as they give marginalised groups – whose concerns may not be seen as widespread or pressing enough by the larger society to be considered as matters of “public concern” – space to regroup and strategise. These counterpublics then serve as platforms from which such groups can argue for the broader public to take their concerns seriously (Fraser, 1995, p. 291). Drawing on Fraser’s earlier formulations, Robert Asen (2000) also describes the “dual character” of counterpublics, which serve both as spaces for internal discussion among members of the subordinated group, and as platforms from which the group can articulate its interests to the larger mainstream public (p. 428). He suggests that this reflects a “publicist as opposed to isolationist orientation of counterpublics,” establishing counterpublics as different from groups that would simply retreat from the public sphere and avoid engaging with it (Asen, 2000, p. 429).

A further critique Fraser (1995) expresses with regard to the public sphere is its designation of certain issues as “public” or of “common concern” and therefore worthy of public discussion, and others as “private” and therefore inappropriate within the public sphere (p. 292). She argues that designating certain issues as “personal” and thus as not public allows for certain forms of violence and oppression, such as family violence, to

continue without being seen as relevant to the wider public (Fraser, 1990, p. 73). What is seen as important to the “majority” or the “mainstream” is rarely dependent on the sheer number of those represented; it is rather a question of power, of which citizens are able to position themselves as the “default” whose interests are assumed to be common, normal, or natural. Fraser (1990) writes that a subaltern counterpublic, on the other hand, can create a space for deliberation about issues marginalised from the public sphere, and a stronger platform for raising those issues within the public sphere as ones that should be considered to be of public importance (p. 67). I argue in this dissertation that blogs often reflect elements of counterpublics, although they cannot be captured fully or neatly as either counterpublic or public spheres.

Alternative media

A definition of alternative media¹⁷ offered by Mitzi Waltz (2005) hints at the field’s overlap with literature on the public sphere. Waltz writes that alternative media can be understood as “those media that provide a different point of view from that usually expressed, that cater to communities not well served by the mass media, or that expressly advocate social change” (Waltz, 2005, p. 2). In particular, Waltz’s reference to the “mass media” echoes Nancy Fraser’s (1990; 1995) critique of the public sphere, and her conceptualisation of alternative media projects reflects a kind of counterpublic, in which

¹⁷ Depending on the kind of blog one is familiar with, it may seem strange to frame a discussion on blogging within the context of alternative media. After all, many of the most well-known blogs today – for example, news blogs such as *The Huffington Post* or celebrity-focused blogs such as *Gawker* or *TMZ* – seem decidedly mainstream in their content, audiences, and commercial nature. Similarly, other blogs with clear commercial interests, or blogs run by popular media figures that serve simply as an extension of their mainstream media presence, may also fall far outside of most definitions of alternative media. As will be examined later in this chapter, however, the majority of existing blogs are much smaller-scale and personal than these high-profile news or celebrity blogs. As such, these smaller blogs share many characteristics with other forms of alternative media, given their grassroots nature and their role as outlets for members of underrepresented groups to discuss issues that concern them.

communities marginalised from mainstream spaces find alternative avenues to express their needs and to organise for change. Creators and consumers of alternative media are thus both responding to the discourses that circulate in the public sphere, and also creating new and separate spaces for a wider range of conversations to take place. Research on alternative media is especially relevant for this dissertation's examination of blogs, because it offers ways to look at how media production facilitates and shapes participation in the public sphere and in counterpublics.

Although no singular definition of alternative media exists – in the same way that the characteristics of a counterpublic may vary depending on the group or the theorist in question – a number of elements may lead one to designate certain media forms or projects as “alternative.” These often include working with resources that are inexpensive and easily accessible (Renzi, 2008, p. 71), having aims other than commercial ones (Rodriguez, 2001), distributing the content in ways that don't rely on mainstream media channels (Waltz, 2005, p. 47), providing information that is less easily obtained from mainstream media (Downing, 2001, p. 44), “deterritorializ[ing] the norms of the majority” (Renzi, 2008, p. 86), and operating through more democratic and less hierarchical organisational structures than those typical of mainstream media institutions (Downing, 2001, p. 44). Alternative media may shift the relationships between media producers and consumers, and they often reflect “closeness to the audience's cultural codes” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 47). John Downing (2001) describes alternative media as having “both vertical and lateral purposes” (p. xi), echoing the dual purposes of counterpublics described above, and referring to the often-simultaneous practices of responding to existing systems of power and building community, solidarity, and communication networks among marginalised

groups. Waltz (2005) points to personal nature of many media products as an additional characteristic of alternative media (p. 20). While many of these characteristics allow media creators to circumvent some of the norms that shape other forms of media production, they also have their limitations, such as inconsistent standards of quality and often-unstable access to funding (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 55). When it comes to blogs, these elements of alternative media can mean that writers are able to create and distribute content with minimal cost (beyond needing access to a computer and the internet) and to share stories that may seem intimately personal or politically radical without any editorial control or oversight.

Many researchers have written that the value of alternative media production can be found as much in the process of creating media as in the end results. Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) argues that the impact of citizens' media projects on their creators is often the most important element of such projects. Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) writes that members of marginalised groups who feel un- or misrepresented in mainstream discourse will be particularly inclined towards using media in ways that challenge dominant constructions of their identities, and produce new and transformative modes of identification. For many of the girl media creators that Kearney observes, creating their own media in a variety of forms becomes a way of both taking control of the ways that they are represented and reappropriating mainstream media texts such that they resonate more clearly with their own interests and desires. What seems important in these cases is not only the texts produced, but also the process of creation itself, and the personal and community-based acts of resistance that arise as a result of that process. All of the bloggers I interviewed for this research spoke about the value that blog writing had had for their

own personal development and sense of connection to others, reflecting a major outcome of their blogging practices that similarly extends beyond the content that is published.

Additionally, these blogs have served as platforms from which to build communities of like-minded bloggers and readers. Alternative media have often also played a role in relationships internal to marginalised communities, functioning effectively as counterpublic spaces where they become “a crucial component of community inclusion, self-advocacy, and empowerment” (Waltz, 2005, p. 25), building internal solidarity and affirmation within marginalised communities, rather than being oriented toward outside communities (Downing, 2001). In the case of diasporic communities, for example, media such as newsletters or radio programmes can be used to create a sense of group identity and connection to a homeland through representations of language and culture (K. H. Karim, 2003; Georgiou, 2006). In a transnational Muslim context, Peter Mandaville (2003) writes that diasporic media become “spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined” (p. 135). Such research highlights the kind of work that media can do in building (and contesting) a sense of internal identity within a particular group, in relation to space, nationality, religion, and ethnicity, among other factors.

At the same time as they find tools to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging, media creators belonging to marginalised groups may also face particular challenges when it comes to disrupting stereotypes or escaping pigeonholing. Those speaking to a wider audience as members of marginalised communities also face dangers of being tokenised, based, for example, on their racialised identification. As such, they face subsequent pressures to speak on behalf of their communities, with their work often being

read as being representative of the entire community and not of the individual producer (Julien & Mercer, 1996; Downing, 2001). As Deirdre M. Kelly, Shauna Pomerantz, and Dawn H. Currie (2006) point out, alternative forms of media production can reproduce identities in ways that conform with hegemonic structures. In other cases, producers of alternative media find their work “being scrutinized, interrogated, appropriated and depoliticized” (Harris, 2003, p. 44), such that their attempts to express themselves have ultimately worked against them by being co-opted for other purposes. Alternative media, in other words, can face significant barriers and challenges, and may not always offer the same potential positive elements to producers and communities. Moreover, given the diversity that exists in every community, there is always a risk that internal inequalities (with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or other factors) within any community producing media may be erased or covered up (Georgiou, 2006; Kearney, 2006). While alternative media carry with them the potential to encourage the use of creative means to get messages out, to challenge dominant narratives, and to build a sense of identity and community, media creation remains in many ways a process always subject to challenges and contestations, and continually shifting in response to both internal and external dynamics.

Alternative media and online activism

While alternative media long predate the internet, the internet has played a major role in shaping many contemporary forms of alternative media, as well as the public sphere to which they are responding. As with other media developments that preceded it, such as the printing press, radio, and television, the internet opens up new ways for information to

be presented and circulated. Like other media activists “making do” with whatever resources they are able to easily access in an everyday context in order to challenge dominant power structures (Jiwani, 2011), participants online take advantage of free templates for creating blogs and websites, and avenues for sharing content over social media, among other things, allowing them to create and distribute content at relatively low cost and with little technical training. Thus, for instance, the potential for dissemination of a message to a mass audience, once nearly impossible without financial resources or through obtaining coverage from mainstream media outlets (Carroll & Ratner, 1999), is transformed online, where the internet creates the possibility for messages to be spread to much greater numbers and wider geographical areas with minimal cost (although widespread circulation is never guaranteed) (Atton, 2008, p. 219). The development of cameras and video capabilities on computers and cell phones has made it easier to create and upload audiovisual content at a much lower cost. Geographic boundaries defining particular communities are also disrupted, and users are able to engage in new forms of participatory citizenship and collective production of knowledge (Guins, 2008, p. 70).

A further major change has come at the level of interaction – and at times a collapsing of divisions altogether – between producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). From commenting on blog posts or YouTube videos to creating new articles or videos in response to a given text, those consuming the media are not only interacting with the media producers, but also positioning themselves as media creators in turn. As Lev Manovich (2009) explains, the internet has gone from being mainly a medium for publishing in the 1990s to a medium increasingly used for communication among users in the 2000s (p. 320). As noted earlier, online media has shifted understandings of public and

private, allowing conversations that may have once happened in separate private spaces or interactions to now incorporate more participants (Papacharissi, 2009). Through all of these facets, the potential nature and impact of alternative media projects has grown and shifted, taking up new ways of building community, providing alternatives to dominant media messages, and making these alternative messages available within a wider public sphere.

Indeed, the internet has been celebrated for its potential to strengthen marginalised communities by providing tools for them to come together and to disseminate information about issues that affect them. Jo Sutton and Scarlet Pollock (2000) write that

[the internet's] global capacity has lent itself to speedy communications from events and situations where activists want to "get the word out" about events as they happen, sometimes for marginalized groups, war situations, bulletins on local struggles, advocacy support networks, crossing national and nationalist boundaries. Other media developments include women's news networks, the use of real audio for women's music and radio, and online video to share news, music, art, and cultural events. (p. 701)

In this way, the internet can facilitate the development of counterpublics, allowing groups to withdraw from mainstream public spheres in order to organise and build solidarity (Sziarto & Leitner, 2010, p. 3).

While much of the literature on alternative media celebrates its potential to further feminist or anti-racist goals (Sutton & Pollock, 2000; Kearney, 2006; Rodriguez, 2001), this promise also has its limits. For one thing, as research on white supremacist websites makes clear, the internet's inclusivity can also create a space for oppressive and violent activities,

in some cases “cloaked” in anti-racist guises to attract people to the sites (Daniels, 2012). Even when it comes to those trying to engage in anti-oppressive work, unequal access to computers and internet connections (on both local and global scales), often known as the digital divide, means that not everyone is in a position to go online and share their media. This “digital divide” is not only a question of having a computer and an internet connection; rather, there is more of a spectrum of access, with the quality of equipment and internet service, as well as the level of training or technical skill, also serving as major factors in determining who is able to use the internet effectively (Livingstone, 2004, p. 6).

Differentiated access to physical resources or technical expertise is not the only factor limiting some people’s internet participation. Language, age, and other factors further affect the ways that people use the internet, and tend to privilege “a technologically-skilled – and mostly male – elite” (Herring, 2003, p. 4). Sutton and Pollock (2000) write about barriers to “access and use,” listing “online safety, pornography, women hating, opportunity, maintenance of public space, access, health and safety, language, and culture” as some of the concerns that women may face (p. 701). In other words, in any discussion of the positive potential of the internet in facilitating alternative media creation and participation, it is important to keep in mind that the internet’s benefits do not extend to all people in equal ways (Morley, 1998, pp. 160-161).

Further to this, Tracy L. M. Kennedy (2000) describes how the name-calling and threats that women face online have led many to be cautious about their online self-presentation, although generally not stopping their internet participation altogether (p. 708). Dale Spender (1996) observes that women online sometimes “withdraw because they are shocked, fed up, threatened or distressed,” and even those who do participate are

often interrupted, prevented from engaging, or met with silence and dismissal when their words are expressed (p. 197). Several creators and writers of prominent feminist blogs have spoken out about the online hatred and threats they confront daily. The psychological toll that this takes has led several well-known bloggers to “retire” from online writing altogether, and has led many more to contemplate doing so (Goldberg, 2015). Another recent movement known as #GamerGate refers to a hashtag first used in August 2014 as a banner for a longer phenomenon of attacks against women in the video game industry. These attacks have included intense and targeted online harassment, including death threats, of female online game-makers and feminist game critics (Chess & Shaw, 2015). While allowing for some new forms of activism and community-building, the internet also provides different levels of risk, often especially high for women and members of other marginalised groups, including Muslims, as well as racialised, trans, and queer communities.

Defining blogs

As the role of online alternative media in relation to the public sphere will be explored in more detail in this dissertation through an examination of blogs, the following sections will provide more detail about the definitions, demographics, and characteristics of blogs, before proceeding to outline some of the relevant theoretical questions they raise for this research. The term “weblog” itself, from which “blog” is derived, was coined by Jorn Barger in 1997 (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 79). In their early incarnations, blogs consisted of short articles that mainly provided links to other web pages. As time went on, blogging software became more advanced and easy to use for those with less computer savvy;

changes in blogging formats also made posts easier to access and reference (Blood, 2004, p. 54). Changes in content further contributed to the development of blogging as a medium, which has grown in part as a result of blogs and blog posts arising from global political and environmental crises (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2006, p. 3). Of course, there are questions about the extent to which these major political moments reflected a shift in “maturity” of blogging itself or simply a greater level of media attention to blogging practices, which then prompted increased numbers of blog readers and writers (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 8). Blogs have in turn become a source of news, with increasing numbers of blogs being published by journalists or other public figures (Varisco, 2010, p. 162), and becoming themselves sources that journalists consult (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 969). Antoinette Pole (2010) argues that blogging may be especially useful for people writing about social justice issues, as it provides a platform free of the editorial control of mainstream media outlets and with the potential for a larger audience than, for example, academic publishing forums.

Robert V. Kozinets (2010) defines a blog as kind of web page where posts are updated regularly and usually displayed with the most recent one first. Blogs are further characterised by the community formed through blog comment sections, as well as the presence of images and videos along with the text (p. 86). As Nina Wakeford (2004) points out, online media texts are notable for their intertextuality, given how easily hyperlinks to other sources can be provided, and also for the ways that visual images and other multimedia sources can be easily incorporated as integral parts of a text. Although many blogs differ quite significantly from one another in their formats, there are a number of elements common to many blogs, including titles, dated and searchable archives,

comments, and hyperlinks (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 974), and posts are often tagged or categorised according to their content (Lovink, 2008). The comment function is an important component of many blogs, credited for bringing about a more democratic writing climate, and for creating increasingly blurry lines between consumers and producers (Blood, 2004, p. 55). The possibility for trackbacks – notes automatically generated at the end of posts, usually as comments, that link to where a given post has been cited in subsequent blog posts – also contributes to building a conversation across blogs (Blood, 2004, p. 55), sometimes creating a community structure in which numerous blogs repeatedly “[link] back and forth to one another’s postings while discussing common topics” (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004, p. 38). Unlike more synchronous online spaces such as chat forums, virtual worlds such as Second Life, or even Twitter, blogs do not generally allow for real-time conversations, although bloggers may be engaged in such conversations on other platforms. At the same time, Kozinets (2010) notes that the asynchronous nature of much online communication, including blogs, provides producers with “more opportunities to engage in strategic control over information and self-presentation than face-to-face exchanges” (p. 69). The nature of the blog can sometimes allow for a more sustained conversation than some of the synchronous forms of online communication, as content is archived and remains easily accessible, meaning that readers can contribute their thoughts long after the post was originally published, and bloggers can refer back to previous writing (Rettberg, 2008). This can also engender a loss of control by the writer as their words are archived over time as opposed to disappearing like face-to-face speech.

Blogs are often created using templates available through the blog server, meaning that they can be created and maintained with minimal technical expertise on the part of the writer (Serfaty, 2004). The proliferation of free blog hosting sites such as Blogger and WordPress also means that creating a blog is free for anyone with a computer and an internet connection. The low level of investment required to start a blog may contribute to what Daniel Martin Varisco (2010) describes as the “ephemeral” quality of the blogosphere (p. 10), as the low cost encourages casual users, whose work is less committed and regular, and whose blogs may not remain active for long. While some have written about the democratising role of blogs, which provide a platform for a wide range of voices and thus have the potential to decentre dominant narratives (Ibrahim, 2009), others note that “hierarchies of access and prominence” continue to operate through existing power relationships and unequal access to resources and audiences among different bloggers (Waltz, 2005, p. 90).

Blogging demographics

Scott Rosenberg’s book *Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It’s Becoming, and Why It Matters* (2009), which looks at the development of blogging through a series of blogs as case studies, focuses on blogs and bloggers that have achieved some prominence, with a wider readership and mainstream media attention. Although Rosenberg’s study does offer insight into the ways that some blogs have developed, his emphasis on those blogs that have received widespread attention sidelines the fact that, as Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) indicate, most blogs are much smaller in scale, and correspondingly attract a smaller number of readers (p. 41). Significantly, these “personal

blogs” are also more likely to be written by women and youth (Lövheim, 2011b, p. 338). It is noteworthy to contrast this with the blogs featured among Rosenberg’s case studies, nearly all of which are written by men. While many of the blogs that receive the most widespread attention are indeed male-authored, a focus only on those particular blogs leaves out much of the world of “blogging” (and potentially also of “why it matters”).

In response to Rosenberg’s title, I would suggest that the question of “why [blogging] matters” may have an entirely different set of answers when applied to smaller-scale blogs and their writers and readers. As Nabil Echchaibi (2009) argues, studying these less prominent blogs may be preferable from the standpoint of a researcher, as they provide a stronger contrast with the content and perspectives of mainstream media than larger, more institutionalised blogs (which may indeed be considered part of mainstream media). He contends that “Less-known blogs not only incarnate better the potential of Internet users to challenge elite control of news production, but they also show us on a smaller scale how individuals and communities use network technologies to sustain new forms of social, cultural, and economic solidarity” (p. 12). Of course, none of these categories is set in stone; with shifting audiences and the potential for posts to “go viral,” small-scale blogs have the potential to become more widely read and recognized, and the popularity and readership of more widely read blogs can also fluctuate.

The question of who bloggers are – in terms of numbers, locations, demographics, and so on – is notoriously complicated to answer. The overall blogging world remains difficult to capture, perhaps reflecting the grassroots and individualised nature of blogging for many people. Additionally, any attempt to define a broad picture of the numbers and demographics of blogs or bloggers is further complicated by the number of blogs that are

no longer active and the lack of a centralised database or archive of blogs (Rettberg, 2008, p. 29). As Pole (2010) explains, blogs seem to have evolved much more quickly than expected: one study in the early 2000s projected that there would be more than 10 million blogs created by 2005. That prediction was later shown to be to be rather conservative; another study put the estimated worldwide number of blogs in 2008 at over 184 million, 25 million of which were based in the United States (Pole, 2010). Researchers disagree about the number of blogs that are active, and about the main gender and age groups represented among bloggers (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 971). Anita Harris (2008) notes that while some research has pointed to young women as the most prolific demographic among bloggers, other work has suggested a more even gender balance, although blogs authored by adult men are generally given higher value and credibility than those written by young women (p. 486). Still other research puts “white, well-educated men in their thirties” as the largest blogging demographic (Pole, 2010). A 2006 Pew survey conducted in the United States observed a relatively equal gender distribution among bloggers, especially among younger bloggers, and also observed that “the ethnic distribution of bloggers was more balanced than that of the general Internet population” (Rettberg, 2008, p. 155).

Specific numbers aside, it is clear that blogging has become a widely used medium, and that the presence of a certain kind of prominent, male-dominated blog has almost certainly been overrepresented in discussions about who is blogging and the role of blogging in the lives of writers and readers. With this in mind, I turn the conversation to the specific sub-genre of personal blogging.

Personal blogging

As Mia Lövheim (2011a) explains, a “common categorization of blogs differentiates between ‘personal blogs’ focused on the everyday life and thoughts of the blogger, ‘filter blogs’ organized as logs of links, comments and evaluations of external, typically public events, or ‘topic blogs’ focused on particular topics and products” (p. 4). She argues that the majority of blogs on the internet fall into this first category of personal blogs, a claim supported by other researchers using similar typologies (Rettberg, 2008; Page, 2011; Pole, 2010). Lövheim (2011a) further notes that young people and women represent the majority of producers within this category (p. 4).

The writing style of personal blogs has been described as reminiscent of hand-written diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs (Rettberg, 2008) and as also reflecting communication styles used in other electronic media such as email (Page, 2011), as well as oral conversations (Rettberg, 2008; Lovink, 2008). Blog posts typically read as chronicles of the daily life and private thoughts and reflections of the writer (Lövheim, 2011a). Usually published as short episodic pieces (similar to diary entries) that may seem fragmented on their own, blog posts reflect broader narratives when read together with the rest of the posts on a given blog, although there is not necessarily one overarching coherent story in the way a novel or memoir might have (Rettberg, 2008), or a clear sense of how or when the blog will end (Serfaty, 2004). In response to the “discontinuity” of fragmented, episodic blog posts, the writers’ use of images of themselves or their physical environments, while not unique to the format of blogging, helps in this case to provide “representations of body and of space [that] function first as devices of continuity, geared to enhancing narrativity” (Serfaty, 2003, p. 6).

Online publics and counterpublics

In this section and the ones that follow, I look at a number of themes reflecting theoretical contributions from literature on the public sphere and alternative media as they relate to online media, and to blogging more specifically, in the context of this dissertation. The internet has been discussed as a kind of public sphere, perhaps even one that is more widely accessible than the eighteenth-century iteration described by Habermas (Thornton, 2001). In fact, some have even claimed that the internet would allow for the kind of setting-aside of markers of difference that Habermas and others claimed would make for a more egalitarian public sphere (Danet, 1998; see also Brophy's [2010] discussion of cyberutopia). A "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" written in the 1990s claimed that "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth" (John Percy Barlow, quoted in Boutros, 2012, p. 242).

On the other hand, as noted earlier, multiple factors such as class and education levels create differential levels of access to online spaces. Even aside from questions of access to space, the bracketing of difference fails to guarantee equal participation, and often means that issues important to marginalised groups go unaddressed, as Fraser (1990) has pointed out (p. 64). Moreover, as will be discussed later in this chapter, race, gender, class, and other markers are often still expressed and read through language or other factors, and where they are absent, users are often assumed in many online spaces to be white and male (Griffin, 2004, p. 195). Thus, the notion of the public sphere online carries many of the same limitations as its offline precedents.

Further complicating this picture is that blogs themselves do not always fit neatly into divisions of private and public. As Anita Harris (2003) has described – and as will be explored at more length in Chapter 3 – writers may sometimes choose blogs precisely *because* of their marginal location in relation to a mainstream public sphere. In that sense, blogs (or at least some blogs) may operate more like counterpublics, as online spaces that have deliberately separated themselves from the mainstream in order to foster discussions that centre issues, languages, and perspectives that may be marginalised from dominant spheres. In this sense, they mirror the “withdrawal and regroupment” dimension of counterpublics (Fraser, 1990, p. 68), where members of marginalised groups and their allies create separate parallel spaces in order to be able to discuss issues of importance to them. Still, most blogs are at least technically available to the public for both reading and commenting. (Many blogging platforms include the option for blogs to be private or password-protected, but the blogs considered in this study are all publicly-accessible.) Thus, even when blogs effectively function as private spaces of regroupment, in most cases they remain available for the general public to both read and comment on. The broader observation being made here is that, while questions related to the public sphere arise frequently throughout this dissertation, many conventional ways of understanding the definitions of public, private, counterpublic, and other related concepts do not map out onto the online environment (or onto blogs in particular) in the same way that they have been theorised in offline spaces.

It may also be productive to think of blogs – or at least some of them – as “sphericules” (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001), “micro cultural worlds” (p. 180) that are largely self-contained, within which cultural production is internally oriented (p. 183).

While this term comes from literature on diasporic media, it can also be more broadly understood to represent smaller spheres within a larger public sphere that are neither closed off from the larger public sphere nor of great interest to much of that larger sphere. Stuart Cunningham and John Sinclair (2001) further note that the cultural production that occurs within sphericules is seldom recognised outside of those particular communities (p. 183), an additional dimension that resonates as a characterisation of many Muslim blogs in general, and Muslim feminist blogs more specifically. Still, while the term aptly captures one characteristic of the spheres in which the bloggers featured in this dissertation find themselves, I prefer to focus on the language of public and counterpublic for a couple of reasons. First, the boundaries around the spheres in which these bloggers write are more fluid than those described by Cunningham and Sinclair; even if many of the discussions are largely internal, each of the blogs also has posts that have attracted readers from vastly different religious or ideological backgrounds. Second, I choose to focus on the tension between ideas of the public sphere and the counterpublic, as a way of highlighting the political dimension of cultivating a space that runs actively “counter” to dominant conversations.

Between private and public

Located “between online publishing and the intimate sphere of diary keeping” (Lovink, 2008, p. 7), blogging as a genre of writing reflects a complicated renegotiation of conceptions of public and private. This paradoxical role raises important questions when conducting research on personal blogs. Campbell (2010) writes that “[b]ecause blogs are often equivalent to individuals making their personal diaries public online they provide a

rich source of content for studying... personal beliefs and identity” (p. 253). While many personal blogs do have this diary-like quality, as noted above, and may indeed be useful as starting points for investigating questions of personal belief, there is a danger of assuming too much “equivalence” between a publicly-accessible online blog and a private diary (or even, for that matter, between a private diary and the totality of a person’s individual beliefs). Viviane Serfaty (2004) describes the role of the computer screen for online diaries as “a paradoxical, twofold metaphor, that of a veil and that of a looking glass” (p. 470). On the one hand, the screen provides a sense of anonymity and protection, allowing the writer to express thoughts and ideas that may be taboo or risky to raise in less anonymous contexts. On the other, it offers readers a window into stories about the experiences and reflections of the writer. Thus, the computer screen serves the dual roles of creating barriers and allowing a sense of intimate access.

Despite the personal and often confessional style of diary-like personal blogs, bloggers write with an awareness of their immediate reading audience, which informs what they choose to write and not to write (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). The access that readers may feel they have to the “back stage” of a writer’s inner, private self must be balanced against the knowledge that blogs are still public performances that play a role in the blogger’s own construction of identity (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Lövheim, 2011a, 2011b; Whitehead, 2015). This is particularly important within research on blogging, where it must be emphasised that (as in any personal or autobiographical writing) what is studied is not necessarily the “true” personal beliefs of the blog writer, but rather the stories that the writer tells about their beliefs, identities, and experiences. The

use of blogs to disrupt dominant understandings of what constitutes public and private experiences and stories will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 3.

Online blogging communities

One key difference between private diaries and online public blogs is that bloggers are not only aware of their audience but also often actively engaging with it – or at least with their imagined impression of it (Wagner, 2012, p. 120). Most blogging platforms allow for comments to be left on blog posts, and commenters engage both with the blog writers and with other readers. Comments from readers expressing agreement or shared perspectives with the blogger may serve as a source of motivation to continue blogging and to expand and improve one's blogging practices (Kennedy, 2000). The impact of blogging also goes beyond the individual blogger. In many cases, active participation by long-time readers reflects a high degree of emotional investment in the blogger's narrative (Whitehead, 2015, p. 124). Echoing earlier discussions about the public sphere, Lövheim (2011b) notes that "personal blogs might also become an arena for collective reflections on changing values and norms for self-expression and social relations" (p. 338-339). Particular discursive moves on the part of the blogger – whether through issuing a direct invitation to readers to share their thoughts, or through building a sense of intimacy with readers by sharing personal experiences – can play a role in fostering discussions not only about individual opinions and stories but also about shared social values (Lövheim, 2011b). Although it could seem from the outside as if commenters simply respond to the thoughts and experiences expressed by the writers, their interactions also shape the future content that the writers produce: a "collaborative project" (Serfaty, 2004, p. 465) facilitated

by the time-specific and episodic nature of blog posts (Page, 2011). Comment sections throughout the blogosphere display no shortage of disagreement and dissent; Lovink (2008) argues, however, that many blogs are more likely to “create communities of like-minded people” than to “foster debate” (p. 21). Ruth Page (2011) notes that online spaces constructed as feminine may be particularly likely to create a sense of “friendship and solidarity” among writers and readers (p. 227). This dimension of alternative online communities recalls Kristin M. Sziarto and Helga Leitner’s (2010) characterisation of counterpublics as spaces strengthened through the presence of “affective grounds for solidarity” (p. 6).

Interactions between bloggers and their audiences are not limited to the comment sections on specific blog posts. Bloggers frequently link to one another, whether within individual blog posts or through a blogroll of recommended and often like-minded blogs. These links create networks of writers who engage with, support, and draw attention to each other’s work (Rettberg, 2008; Pole, 2010). Although little research has been done at the time of writing this dissertation about the role of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms in fostering and reinforcing communities among bloggers, such connections can be easily observed through informal day-to-day exchanges and retweets, through the creation of Facebook groups and pages, through spontaneous hashtag conversations, and through the occasional more organised conversation in which a particular date, time, and hashtag is specified on Twitter for a time-specific, concerted discussion on a particular issue. For example, in February 2014, the #BeingBlackAndMuslim hashtag drew over 7000 tweets in 24 hours from Muslims who talked about anti-Black racism within Muslim communities (The Stream, 2014). In March

2015, Twitter users across Canada used the hashtag #DressCodePM to tweet at Stephen Harper and to ask for his approval on their clothing choices, in the aftermath of a comment the then-Prime Minister made about the niqab being inconsistent with Canadian values (Abedi, 2015).

Networks among bloggers also exist and grow beyond what is immediately and publicly visible online, as some bloggers form offline relationships with one another (Pole, 2010). In fact, as Rachel Wagner (2012) points out, “the term ‘online community’ itself may be a bit of a misnomer,” given how commonly the boundaries between “online” and “offline” communities are blurred, either by groups already connected offline also using the internet to organise and communicate, or by members of online communities eventually also meeting in person (pp. 130-131). Kozinets (2010) similarly notes that online communities involve “real people” and cultures, and thus should not be thought of as being only “virtual” (p. 15), an issue I will return to in more depth in Chapter 5. As readily attested by all the participants in my study, bloggers often deepen their relationships with one another and with their readers through email, Skype, or in-person meet-ups. Physical gatherings of bloggers also take place in more formal ways. For instance, BlogHer, a large network of women’s blogs, holds a large and high-profile conference every year in which bloggers and readers who have been building networks online are able to connect in person (Freedman, 2014). It becomes clear that, as Kozinets (2010) writes, “Online communities are not virtual.... Online communities *are* communities” (p. 15).

Levels of participation: Audiences, readers, networks, and communities

Along with the idea of the “public,” there are other related terms that will be used throughout this dissertation. I define them here so that they can be easily distinguished from one another as they relate to this dissertation. As noted early in this chapter, the term “public” refers to the overall imagined ensemble of people who may be addressed by or potentially in conversation with a particular text. The term “audience” or “reader” is used more narrowly to refer to the people who actually read the text in question, and I use “commenter” to designate someone who has left a comment on a given post. A “network” may refer to a series of connections that have been built through people being made aware of each other’s activities, but where there may not be active engagement or sustained participation. I use the word “community,” on the other hand, to refer to readers who have actively engaged in some way with the bloggers, in some kind of sustained way (for example, by commenting repeatedly, through frequent conversations over Twitter, or by becoming Facebook friends), suggesting the development of relationships that go beyond occasional interaction (Kozinets, 2010, p. 8). Wagner (2012) similarly uses “community” to reflect a kind of “commitment” on the part of participants, whereas a “network” is referred to as reflecting simply a “possibility” (p. 131). Most often, in the case of this research, the phenomenon of “community” can be observed through readers who comment regularly on a particular site and are clearly engaged in a regular conversation with the blogger and/or with other commenters.

“Community” also encompasses readers who engage with the bloggers in other ways, such as through social media. In some cases, examples of community created through blogs can even be found offline; Kirstin had her daughters send artwork by post to

readers who sent her their addresses (wood turtle, 23 December 2013), and all of the bloggers have met friends in person whom they know through their blogs. Of course, these terms may not have clear borders (a given reader may, for example, move back and forth between more passive “audience” membership and more active membership in the “community”), but the main purpose in delineating them here is to highlight the range of levels of relevance, engagement, and participation that may exist among people addressed by, reading, and/or responding to the bloggers’ writing.

Anonymity and self-disclosure

As a space where the bodies of its participants are not immediately accessible or observable to others, the internet allows for users to make decisions about which dimensions of their identities to disclose or conceal (or even to assume identities that they do not claim in offline spaces). Although not all of the bloggers in my study choose to be anonymous, a look at research about anonymity, self-disclosure, and identity online helps illustrate some of the complexities of the internet’s role in both overcoming and reinforcing some of the challenges experienced in other forms of media production and participation. As noted above, much early writing on the internet celebrated its potential to erase differences among people and create an idealised egalitarian public sphere where people would not be judged on the basis of their race, gender, or other characteristics (Brophy, 2010, p. 929; Boutros, 2012, p. 242). In a potentially anonymous context such as the internet, then, markers of one’s identity may be less easily observed, a fact that has led some internet users to report that they write with greater freedom and personal expression online than when using other forms of media (Dawson, 2005, p. 32). As Adam

N. Joinson (2005) points out, the sense of anonymity online may lead people to disclose more about themselves to people online than to people in their physical surroundings (p. 23). For other participants, it is the vastness of the internet that provides a sense of protection for those who may not want to be found (Serfaty, 2004, p. 470).

Yet at the same time, there have been questions about how realistic or effective this anonymity is in sheltering participants from offline power dynamics. Researchers have noted that gendered and other hierarchies of status and power are established online in new ways through textual cues related to gender (Griffin, 2004, p. 195), along with other “social cues, such as verbal floor-managing..., and the presence or absence of signature files” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 24). Moreover, even if differences in power were entirely erased, in most cases “[u]sers online are assumed white – and are often assumed male, middle-class, technologically savvy, and on US-based sites, Christian” (Brophy, 2010, p. 932). Lisa Nakamura [2008] notes that there are spaces where this is not the case, such as websites organised around particular racialised identities, or experiences such as pregnancy, where the default user may be assumed to be of a particular gender or racialised background, but there remain many spaces online where the default of the assumed white male is very much present. This assumption reifies some identities as normal and erases other identities that are implicitly imagined not to be present unless specified as such, suggesting that the promise of an anonymous and thus egalitarian dynamic online is not realistic, because some identities are still seen as more present or natural than others.

In other words, the supposed anonymity of the internet has not always served to provide protection for those seeking an escape from the oppression they face in other facets of their lives. Even more troubling is that, as noted earlier, anonymity on the

internet sometimes offers a cover for those expressing racist and sexist sentiments (Daniels, 2012, pp. 7-8; Spender, 1996, p. 195), making it difficult to stop or prosecute acts of harassment (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 213). Thus, researchers such as Jessica E. Brophy (2010) reject the idea of a “cyberutopia” in which participants are understood as disembodied and unmarked (p. 933), arguing that the “disembodied utopian dream masks the processes and performances that re-create and re-enact oppressive normative social structures” (p. 931).

Given this dynamic in which anonymity can sometimes do more to perpetuate marginalisation than to challenge it, it may not be surprising that even in a supposedly anonymous context like the internet, much work is actually done to highlight certain aspects of people’s identities instead of hiding them or simply allowing them to go unnoticed or unspecified. Perhaps most interesting are the ways particular dimensions of identity are mobilised online, such that pretences of anonymity (or of disconnection from particular identifications) are more consciously and deliberately rejected. In her study of race in online visual cultures, Lisa Nakamura (2008) details a number of contexts where race, gender, ethnic backgrounds, and other factors are actively made visible by internet users. She looks, for example, at the creation of profile images and avatars, where users use visual symbols to actively “[express] diasporic, ambivalent, *intersectional* selves... within closed communities,” (p. 47; emphasis in original), often explicitly choosing to express certain dimensions of their identities, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, or religion. At the same time, of course, there is never any guarantee that personas assumed online correspond to the user’s offline identity. Deborah Whitehead (2015) has written, for

example, about some “mommy bloggers” who had built a large following were found to have fabricated the stories and struggles they shared on their blogs.

Campbell (2005) writes that the anonymity of the internet creates “a space of freedom and experimentation,” where “[i]ndividuals are able to ‘re-present’ themselves by either highlighting certain attributes or hiding others, or even creating new persona for themselves” (p. 115). For some, this means moving away from ideas that social issues are best debated from stances that are supposedly disembodied and unaffected by individual social locations (a principle reflected in the Habermasian public sphere, which Fraser [1990], among others, has argued is neither realistic nor desirable) towards instead explicitly naming one’s social identifications and thereby finding value in work that is motivated by solidarity through the recognition of common experiences with others who have shared similar stories (Byrne, 2008, p. 22). In cases where marginalised groups have been represented in harmful and stereotypical ways in mainstream media, affirming one’s membership in that group within online media practices can also become a way of responding to those negative representations (Palczewski, 2001, p. 165). In other words, it may be more fruitful to “[reject] ‘leaving the body behind’” (Brophy, 2010, p. 930), and examine the ways that bodies and specific identity markers are invoked online.

Anonymity – or, perhaps more accurately, the potential for selective self-disclosure – thus serves an ambiguous role when it comes to online self-expression. For some, it can represent a form of escape from their offline reality (although it also provides the same cover for those engaging in threats or harassment). For others, their bodies and gendered or racialised identities may not be something they want to escape from, and the internet instead provides different ways of giving meaning to bodies, experiences, and social

categories. It remains important to ask what it is that is being revealed or assumed about participants in the absence of explicit markers, and to challenge the notion that one's online activities are necessarily or fully divorced from one's physical and social locations.

Gender, blogging, and women's writing practices

The weight given to online writing by women becomes an issue not only in the content of what women writers online disclose about themselves, but also in the styles of writing that are associated with women. It is therefore worthwhile also to locate the blogs that will be examined in this dissertation within the context of writing styles associated with women, girls, and femininity more broadly, particularly with reference to some of the historical and theoretical questions that have been raised in previous studies of women's writing. The intention of this dissertation is certainly not to argue that blogging is an inherently feminine practice or that women are somehow biologically more inclined towards first-person narratives. Still it is relevant to note that social constructions around gender and knowledge production have often associated particular writing styles more closely with women than with men, and have often dismissed the importance of such writing as a result.

As noted earlier, personal blogging shares certain stylistic characteristics with diary writing: first-person perspectives, chronicles of everyday life, episodic entries, open-ended narrative arcs, and so on (Serfaty, 2003, 2004; Lovink, 2008; Rettberg, 2008; Lövheim, 2011a). Many of these characteristics have also been historically associated with writing by women (Malina & Nutt, 2000, p. 18), whether in diaries or other forms, particularly in terms of perspective (first-person, subjective, affective) and content (daily experiences and

personal observations). Such associations can have the effect of “downplaying” the significance of the work done by women online (Page, 2011, pp. 220-221). This is in contrast to the authority accorded to writing associated with “detachment, disinterest, distance, and universality” and masculinity (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 80). When it comes to online narratives, men’s writing has sometimes been seen as more factual, with an absence of attention to emotion or community (Page, 2011, p. 221), and “women’s blogs are taken less seriously” than men’s (Harris, 2008, p. 486). Of course, these are very general impressions, and as explained below, say much more about the constructions of gender as they relate to these writing styles than about empirically observable gender differences.

While this gender division in writing style and reception has never been as stark in practice as the above descriptions would imply, the notion that women’s writing comes from subjective feelings and experiences and men’s from objective knowledge and truths has historically been used to establish men’s work and writings as more authoritative (Hawkesworth, 2006; Code, 1991). Feminist challenges to this perception have fuelled a political commitment to lend greater value to women’s voices and stories. From this commitment comes research from within fields including literature and media studies that turns its attention to forms of expression by women and girls that have often been devalued: not only diaries (Hunter, 1992; Gannett, 1992), but also scrapbooks (Greer, 2011), cookbooks (Zafar, 1999; Fleitz, 2010), zines (Harris, 2003 Licon; 2005; Schilt & Zobl, 2008; Kearney, 2006; Stasko, 2001), and even girls’ bedrooms (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Kearney, 2007). Of course, this work also includes websites (Harris, 2003, 2008; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004) and blogs (Lövheim 2011a, 2011b; Page, 2011; Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2011; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). For some media creators, the lower attention and

value attributed to some of these media forms may in fact be a positive feature, offering a way to circumvent the potential for outside surveillance, control, or appropriation present in more mainstream forms of media production (Harris, 2003, p. 45). Harris (2003) also notes that, especially in cases where a notion like girl power can become easily co-opted and commodified in dominant political and media discourses, young women make deliberate use of more marginal spaces, online and offline, to express their ideas and create conversations (p. 39).

In talking about the connections between gender and blog writing, and particularly about the value of looking seriously at women's personal writing and stories that women tell about their lived experiences, I do not mean to suggest that this is the only (or the main) kind of writing that women have ever done, nor to suggest that these are writing practices in which only women participate. To do so would risk simply replacing one set of gendered stereotypes and expectations with another, potentially reinforcing a particular set of writing styles as distinctly feminine or positioning it as a source of more valuable or authoritative records of women's ideas than other forms of writing. Instead, this dissertation looks at women's personal narratives, in this case blog writing, not as exhibiting intrinsically feminine qualities nor as the only important form of writing in which women engage, but rather as a kind of writing whose value has often been downplayed because of its association with femininity and subjectivity, resulting in the perception that it is less serious and objective. Asserting the value of this kind of writing in a context where writing associated with masculinity is often privileged should be taken as an expansion, rather than a replacement, of the field of writers and writing media that are worthy of attention.

Religion, media, and the public sphere

In addition to the themes discussed above, it is also important to consider the role of religion in relation to the public sphere and media participation. José Casanova (1994) writes that, contrary to the expectations of certain theories of secularisation that would have seen the public role of religion decreasing, this is not what has taken place. Instead, he argues that “[most] religious traditions have resisted all along the process of secularization as well as the privatization and marginalization which tend to accompany this process” (p. 6). Similarly, although Habermas’ original writing on the public sphere originally excluded religion, this perspective has shifted in recent years (Calhoun, 2011, p. 127). Habermas’ later work (2006; 2008) acknowledges that religion continues to play a key role in public life, and that it is both unrealistic and inappropriate to call for religious individuals to excise religion entirely from their public engagement (Habermas, 2006, p. 9). In fact, his acknowledgement of the ways that religious citizens may be asked to translate their ideas in order to be intelligible within the public sphere (Habermas, 2006) carries an echo of Fraser’s (1990) comments that the public sphere is not equally accessible to all.

As many scholars have already noted, mediation processes have always been central to religions, whether through scripture, oral traditions, rituals, or other means; in fact, religions themselves can be seen as forms of mediation between the human or earthly realms and those of the divine or supernatural (Stolow, 2005; Meyer & Moors, 2006; Horsfield, 2008; Morgan, 2011; de Vries, 2001). While the phenomenon of interactions and overlap between media and religion is not new, the introduction of particular forms of media has played a role in shifting social norms and practices related to religion. The development of print media, for example, had a significant role in transforming modes of

dissemination of religious knowledge, initially in Christian-dominated Europe (Stolow, 2010, p. 19) and later spreading to Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere (Mandaville, 2004, p. 155), although not without controversy (Messick, 1993, p. 116). More recent changes have included the impact of television, televangelism, and debates on the validity of the “electronic church” (Rosenthal, 2007). News stories from late 2012 about then-Pope Benedict XVI opening a Twitter account (Pullella, 2012) reflect a religious establishment attempting to translate itself into a new language of the masses, one in which Catholics worldwide have already been deeply engaged for quite some time. The work of Charles Hirschkind (2006) in Egypt details the role of technology in transforming local religious conversations. As he describes it, the widespread use of cassettes with Islamic lectures led to new expressions of religion in the public sphere, and new opportunities for expressing one’s own religious knowledge and opinions and challenging those of others. Such transformations have continued along with the emergence of new online, digital, and mobile forms of media, incorporating new kinds of virtual prayer and ritual participation, and raising new questions that range from whether it is appropriate for Muslims to take cell phones with Qur’an ringtones into the bathroom to whether the minimum quorum for a Jewish religious service can be met through the presence of avatars on *Second Life* (Wagner, 2012, p. 1). While it would be simplistic to attribute societal shifts to media alone, it is clear that media can and do play a role in social transformation as patterns of communication and of knowledge production and dissemination shift dramatically (Meyer, 2006, pp. 290-291). Further, as illustrated in the above examples, the changes that accompany the rise of new forms of media can be controversial and contradictory,

involving not only the dissemination of content or discussions thereof, but also questions and changes at the level of practice in new virtual environments.

The relation of offline religious communities and traditions to the online presence of religion has been the subject of much discussion. In an early attempt to describe what religion looks like when brought onto the internet, Christopher Helland (2005) made a distinction between “religion online” and “online religion;” the former designated content made available online about existing offline religious traditions and communities, while the latter referred to religious activities and practices that take place exclusively online. Similarly, Anastasia Karaflogka (2002) has written about “religion *on* cyberspace” in contrast to “religion *in* cyberspace,” again with the first term denoting the online presence of information and discussions related to institutions and activities that exist offline, while the second describes new kinds of religious practices that develop online (pp. 284-285; emphasis in original). While these conceptualisations have some use in beginning to map the range of religious activities that take place online, they also uphold a distinction that overlooks the complexity of online activities, in which supposedly “offline” practices and spaces may play a larger and more important role than what is typically captured in this polarised framework.

This is, in fact, a critique that both Helland (2005) and Karaflogka (2002) recognise, although both maintain that the overall distinction remains useful, even as lines are blurred. Illustrating these blurred lines, Karaflogka observes, for example, the presence of online places of worship, such as cyberchurches and cybersynagogues, which share some similarities with their offline counterparts, while making use of the communicative possibilities of the internet (p. 286). More recently, Heidi A. Campbell (2012) has argued

that the shifts observed in studies of religious practice online reflect similar shifts that have taken place within Western society more broadly, and thus that it is “naïve” for studies of religion and the internet to look only at ways that the internet is apparently transforming religious ideas and practices (p. 66). In other words, she suggests that the distinctions drawn by scholars such as Helland and Karaflogka are too narrow, and that it is important to approach the topic with broader attention to other social and political shifts, along with the internet, that play a role in transformations of religious practice. The diverse examples of Muslim feminist engagement, as well as the activity levels of Muslim feminists online, illustrate the dynamic relationship between offline and online and the weaknesses of an approach that would seek to distinguish the two.

Although any discussion of the newness of a new technology is best tempered with a concurrent acknowledgement that its “newness” tends to carry a great deal of continuity with previous forms of media, the internet does indeed introduce some shifts within discussions of media and religion. For example, Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (2004) identify five major differences between the internet and television when it comes to how they may be used for religious (among other) purposes:

- (1) the Internet is an interactive and not simply a broadcast medium; (2) the Internet is truly multimedia; (3) the Internet employs hypertextuality; (4) anyone can launch himself [sic] onto the World Wide Web with relative ease and little expense; (5) the Internet is global in its reach. (p. 10)

As Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (2003) explain, online media also serve to reduce “the social and cultural distance on the Internet between producer and consumer,” and to carve out a space between the elite knowledge of specialised religious scholars and

“sub-literacy” to which some mass media forms cater (p. 9). Users have taken advantage of the possibilities offered by the internet in a number of ways, resulting in what Stewart Hoover (2006) refers to as a “stunning array of websites” related to religion, spanning traditionalist groups, emerging new religious movements, interfaith forums, and many others (p. 48). Participants may use the internet for purposes including finding community (or even romantic partners), proselytising, searching for religious texts, and a number of other purposes (Varisco, 2010, p. 158).

Muslims online

The aforementioned religious practices and shifts related to the internet can also be observed in research specific to Muslims online. Islam-oriented participation online takes a number of forms, involving Qur’an and *hadith* translations and commentary, websites giving Islamic legal rulings or advice, matrimonial sites, and information on local mosques and prayer times (Anderson, 2003, p. 48), sermons on YouTube (Hirschkind, 2012), and virtual pilgrimages (Bunt, 2004a, p. 132). Bruce B. Lawrence (2002) categorises the many facets of Muslim presence online as including large independent religious or cultural organisations (p. 242); governments of Muslim-majority countries that claim a role in “projecting an Islamic presence in cyberspace” (p. 244); and a number of smaller groups and individuals, a category that encompasses, among others, Muslim women, Sufi organisations, and “other minority groups,” including Ismailis, queer Muslims, and others (pp. 248-249). Linked to this last category, Varisco (2010) writes that “[c]yberspace is a safe haven for marginalized Muslims,” including Muslims from minority sects such as Ahmadiyyas, as well as Muslims who identify as queer (although Varisco also points out

that the internet is also home to Muslim websites that are explicitly anti-Ahmadiyya or anti-queer) (p. 163). In some cases, Muslim women have used the online environment to assert their Muslimness while challenging patriarchal gender norms within their communities (Belghazi, 2005, p. 278). Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2011) describe the internet as a space both for building collective identities – involving negotiations of what it means to be part of the group, and what the interests and responsibilities of Muslims should be, in terms of political issues and appeals to a global community – and for asserting divergent identities, in which sectarian, political, or gender differences (to give only a few examples) among Muslims become highlighted. In some instances, certain Muslims’ affiliations with particular online religious spaces lead them to “explain their worldview in terms of identifying with a specific Islamic website, rather than a particular local mosque or religious network” (Bunt, 2009, p. 10).

Peter Mandaville (2003) writes about Muslim scholars who appeal to Muslims to develop an “*ummah* consciousness,” an awareness of and sense of belonging within a global Muslim community, based not simply on one’s religious affiliation as a Muslim but, more importantly, on a sense of active commitment and participation. If, as Taieb Belghazi (2005) writes, the *ummah* has always been more of a discursive construct than an empirical reality, many of the qualities that inform it (an imagined community of strangers, who often share an understanding of being engaged in collective processes of deliberations in order to understand religious texts and principles) are also qualities that constitute a public sphere. Thus, the “*ummah* consciousness” that Mandaville refers to suggests that the *ummah* can be imagined not only as a category of people who identify as “Muslim” but also, in a more active sense, as a global Muslim public sphere.

Meyer and Moors (2006) write that the development of electronic media has “[facilitated] the constitution of a new Muslim public” in which both state and religious authorities are challenged, and where religion develops “*along with* information technology” (p. 5). Jon W. Anderson (2005) is even more emphatic with regard to the internet’s role within a global Muslim public sphere, asserting that, in less than two decades, “the Internet has developed from humble beginnings to public prominence to reshape the public sphere of Islam” (p. 252). There are a number of areas where this can be observed, including YouTube videos posted by religious scholars, a variety of forums for online discussions about Islamic beliefs and laws, and a wide range of personal blogs that reflect Muslim lives across the globe. In this setting, the internet plays a fundamental role in the mediation both of people’s lived religious experiences and of the experience and conception of a global Muslim public.

At the same time, as seen with literature on the public sphere more broadly, neither the notion of a worldwide Muslim public sphere nor its online presence can be idealised as universally accessible to all who would aspire to participate in it. Although there are Muslims active online around the world, large numbers of Muslims have limited internet access at most (Bunt, 2004b; Wheeler, 2002). Researchers have observed that discrepancies of access and usage mean that, in comparison to the overall global Muslim population, Muslims in North America and Europe (both immigrant populations and converts), and Muslims writing in Western languages, are disproportionately present online (Varisco, 2010, p. 160; Scholz et al., 2008, pp. 464-465; Mandaville, 2003, p. 143). Further, miriam cooke and Bruce Lawrence (2005) write that the heavy participation of Western Muslims reflects not only a higher degree of access to resources but also a “need

for faith-based community” (p. 23) more prevalent among Muslims in contexts where they are a minority and have fewer options for local faith-based connection. Discrepancies of access also apply in cases of women and minorities. Belghazi (2005) has noted that “[s]ome Muslim women... appropriate the Net in order to constitute a subaltern public sphere that empowers them to subvert male dominance, beginning with an alternative narrative of Muslim loyalty and legitimacy” (Belghazi, 2005, p. 278). One can imagine that similar counterpublic spaces are carved out by, for example, Muslims who identify as queer or who are part of minority sects whose concerns may be dismissed or overlooked within the mainstream Muslim public sphere. These examples should cause us to think critically about who is and is not included in descriptions of a worldwide Muslim public sphere.

Similar questions arise about the existence of a “Muslim blogosphere,” a term used both academically and non-academically to refer to the collective presence of Muslim blogs online. The website for the Brass Crescent Awards, for example, describes the awards as a recognition of prominent blogs in the “Islamsphere” (see <http://www.brasscrescent.org/>). Some of the existing research on Muslim blogs seems to identify its scope as the general “Muslim blogosphere,” without defining this or accounting for what may be excluded because of language, region or other factors (Siapera, 2009, 2011; Varisco, 2010; Agarwal et al., 2011). Other research refers somewhat vaguely to a “Muslim blogosphere” before focusing in on a particular subsection thereof, such as Germany (Eckert & Chadha, 2013), Indonesia (M. Lim, 2012), or a comparison between Indonesia and Iran (M. Lim, 2009). The fact that the Brass Crescent Awards recognise only English-language blogs already draws linguistic boundaries around the supposed “Islamsphere” that exclude a huge number of Muslim bloggers. Even if, as some have observed, Western-based and English-

speaking Muslims represent a disproportionate number of the Muslims active online as compared to the global Muslim population (Varisco, 2010, p. 160), the designation of the “Islamsphere” as implicitly an English-speaking one should cause readers to wonder about where to place the work being done by bloggers writing on Islam-related issues in Indonesian, Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Somali, and countless other languages. Just as there has never been one unitary public sphere, the online environment also brings with it questions about who gets to define “the” public sphere, the power dynamics involved in who gets to claim that sphere as their own, and the existence of multiple and sometimes competing spheres.

Following this, the relationship of Muslim feminist bloggers to the idea of a Muslim blogosphere may be tenuous. As noted above, the issues considered to be of “common concern” within a particular sphere will never exhaust all of the concerns and demands of all members (Fraser, 1990, p. 71). As Muslim women located in the West, the four bloggers featured in this dissertation may be considered as part of a broader Western (or North American, or Canadian or United States) public sphere; conversely, they may find themselves as part of a global Muslim public sphere, or at least the English-speaking portion thereof. The notion of a Muslim blogosphere encompasses all of these blogs at least in name, although I would also argue that the blogs are part of a feminist counterpublic within (or in reaction to) that particular sphere. On the flip side, they may at times be part of a Muslim counterpublic within the counterpublic sphere of feminist blogs. Furthermore, each of the bloggers positions herself differently in terms of her own identity, and may find herself moving through a number of other spheres depending on her personal interests, commitments, and locations: counterpublics formed on the basis of being

Pashtun, African, people of colour, queer, mothers, children of immigrants, Muslim converts, and so on. The multiple ways in which the bloggers relate to public, private, and counterpublic spaces will be explored further throughout this dissertation.

Islamic religious authority online

As Islamic discussions first began to emerge online, Muslim participants found a context where issues could be discussed away from institutional authorities, with users finding increased avenues to look for their own answers and information instead of relying on local scholars, and to connect with like-minded Muslims outside of their local communities. Expanding on changes brought about by the printing press, the internet allowed for “ordinary Muslims [to] contribute to the discourse about what is correct Islamic belief or practice” (Anjum, 2007, p. 667). Peter Mandaville (2004) observes that the internet allows Muslims to look for “Islamic” answers to their questions, and that the character of the internet also allows for others to contest the information they see, and provide alternate opinions and resources (p. 168). According to Eickelman and Anderson (2003), these new claims to authority can be at least partially explained by technological changes that allow for an increased “range of participants,” particularly as education levels have increased in Muslim societies, as has access to religious knowledge in contexts that put less emphasis on traditionally specialised texts or languages (pp. 11-12). Eickelman (1998) notes, however, that these shifts related to both education levels and technological developments long predate the development of online media, and are linked also to massive increases in literacy and access to print media, as well as other earlier forms of media such as cassettes (p. 86). Moreover, as Gary Bunt (2009) reminds us, disruptions in

the transmission of Islamic knowledge is nothing new; Islam has had a long history of “open-source” deliberations and transformations of legal and scholarly ideas and texts, linked to the ways that Islamic structures of knowledge were developed (p. 3). Research by Dorothea Shulz (2006) in Mali and by Moors (2006) in Palestine similarly points to the ways that women’s meeting groups have created new offline frameworks for religious authority and knowledge transmission. Again, this reflects a kind of flexibility within Islamic thought, practice, and learning that long predates (and continues to coexist alongside) the internet. While it is clear, then, that the internet is not responsible for *creating* the “open-source” framework that Bunt describes, it does provide a fertile ground for diverse forms of authority and knowledge production to flourish.

This phenomenon has had varied results. Several scholars have noted the ways that the power held by institutional forms of authority has decreased as religious adherents find forums online (and elsewhere) where they can challenge canonical interpretations or learn about new ones (Campbell, 2007; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Scholz, Selge, Stille, and Zimmerman (2008) attribute shifts in Islamic religious authority online to four main factors: “the high accessibility and flexibility of the Internet,” which means that new developments can have a wider audience than would have previously been the case; the “participative potential” of the internet, allowing more people and groups to take part in online conversations about religion; the increasing diversity in perspectives that can be represented online; and the changes in communication styles within religious discourses as Islam-related materials are made intelligible within an online environment (pp. 465-466). Piela (2012) describes the online transformations of Islamic authority as a process of “atomization,” where knowledge is dispersed, and individuals encounter a greater variety

of texts and interpretations thereof (p. 27). Similarly, Bryan S. Turner (2007) argues that the format of the internet disrupts traditional means of transmission of religious knowledge, whether oral or print, thus also disrupting the associated “linear, hierarchical, imitative and repetitive” disciplinary techniques associated with these forms of religious instruction (p. 118). In Turner’s (2007) words, the internet permits users to “[bypass] the traditional gatekeepers of Muslim orthodoxy,” and even create spaces where smaller or fringe groups and movements appear to have the same level of authority as more mainstream or established ones (p. 127). More than simply shifting the emphasis away from structures seen as having historical or traditional authority, the online environment can also serve to make space for voices that had previously been marginalised (Campbell, 2007, p. 1046), such as women and minority groups (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, p. 111). For Muslim women living in the West, this platform can be important not only as a space to voice their opinions within Muslim communities but also as a forum for expressing themselves in contrast with the marginalisation and silencing of Muslim women that also happens within mainstream Western media (Piela, 2012, p. 17).

In other cases, the internet can be used to reinforce the power of already-established authorities. For some, this may simply be an instance of adapting to the needs of the congregation in practical ways. Given that many members of religious communities are active online, it is perhaps only logical, if not necessary, that religious leaders would build an internet presence in order to remain relevant and present in the lives of their congregations (Helland, 2004, p. 26). One example of this occurring within Muslim communities is the creation of numerous websites where people can obtain religious rulings or advice from established scholars, a phenomenon that can have particular

relevance for Muslims living in diaspora and wanting access to “traditional” learning (Turner, 2007, p. 132). As Bunt (2009) writes, “that image of imams and scholars directly typing religious opinions or fatwas into a laptop has become reality” (p. 115), although of course established imams and scholars are not the only ones sharing religious opinions online. Campbell (2007) explains that some studies of Orthodox Jewish communities have demonstrated how internet technology can be deployed by religious authorities, and taken up by community members, in ways that deliberately make space for and reinforce religious and cultural norms, rather than challenge them (pp. 1056-1057). There have also been instances where people in positions of authority within some religious communities have tried to “infiltrate online groups to try and control information shared online” (Campbell, 2010, p. 252). In other words, the internet contributes to multiple and sometimes contradictory phenomena: on one hand, it offers established religious authorities an avenue for strengthening their authority through new platforms, while on the other hand it also offers opportunities for others to compete with these authorities as they use the same forms of technology to access and disseminate knowledge and opinions.

Looking more closely at Muslim blogs

One of the first Muslim blogs to be widely read in the West was that of Salam Pax, an Iraqi blogger whose writing in English from 2003-2004 during the United States military invasion of Iraq drew international media attention, including mainstream Western media. Eugenia Siapera (2011) characterises blogs such as this one as “bridge blogs,” which serve to represent stories from a Muslim context to a Western audience. Since the days of Salam Pax, Muslim blog activity has come to encompass political blogs, mommy blogs, convert

testimonials, and advice blogs run by religious scholars, as well as countless other blogs by Muslims of various ages and backgrounds. Varisco (2010) highlights the communal and dialogical dimensions of negotiating religious identity and authority on the internet, pointing out the opportunities for connection created by the online environment, including through blogs (p. 173), and also pointing out that Muslim bloggers do not write only about religion-related topics (p. 167). Siapera (2009) notes that Muslim blogs “expand and blur the lines separating the private from the public,” through not only talking publicly about topics that might be considered private, but also challenging the notion that these issues should be considered private in the first place (p. 41).

The Brass Crescent Awards honour English-language Muslim blogs from a number of categories each year, in a “celebration of the Islamsphere.” Readers of Muslim-authored or Muslim-related blogs are asked to nominate, and later to vote on, their favourite blogs, writers, posts, and Twitter accounts. The Brass Crescent Awards have recently marked their twelfth year, and the blogs recognised represent a range of topics, religious perspectives, and geographic locations. Many of the blogs recognised in the first few years of the Awards are no longer active, again reflecting the relatively short life spans of many blogs. On the other hand, the continued existence of the Awards indicates the persistence of Muslim-oriented blogs united (even loosely) under a common banner, however disparate their content, focus, or readership. Even apart from the women’s blogs highlighted in the “Best Female Blogger” category (which are obviously female-authored), blogs written by Muslim women (or groups of Muslim women) made up approximately one third of the 2012 Brass Crescent Award winners and nominees and two thirds of the 2014 nominees.

Locating this research in relation to other Muslim blogs

The bloggers that form the focus of this dissertation are not the only people blogging about gender issues in Islam, and nor are the issues discussed here the only ones that Muslim women blog about. As will be further developed in Chapter 2, I am interested in looking at how the stories that Muslim women tell on their blogs play a role in processes of religious interpretation. I also locate this dissertation within a political and social context of shifts in interpretations and practices as they relate to gender in a North American Muslim context. As noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, this work is being done both within and outside of self-identified feminist frameworks. Although all four bloggers ultimately selected for the dissertation do identify as feminist, my initial investigation of the wider field for the purposes of identifying which blogs to study adopted a broader lens, looking for blogs where critical examination of gender issues in Islam is a central theme, regardless of the language used to define such an examination. The content and approach of Muslim women's blogs is incredibly heterogeneous, and the perspectives reflected among the bloggers in this dissertation exist among many others.

As part of the process of selecting the four blogs that became the main examples used in this dissertation, I first set out in the fall of 2013 to explore the larger field of Muslim women's blogs, in order to get a sense of who is blogging and on which topics. I began with a number of blogs with which I was already familiar, as well as blogs by North American Muslim women listed in blog databases such as the Muslim Bloggers Directory at <http://www.ijtema.net>, and nominees or winners of Brass Crescent Awards. I limited myself to blogs written by self-identified Muslim women, and as I explained in the Introduction, I focused on women located in North America. I further narrowed the focus

to blogs that included discussions of personal religious experiences and of gender issues within a religious context, whether or not these were the main or exclusive focus of the blogs. I then looked through the blogrolls of each of the blogs I found through this process; these typically listed around 20-30 blogs but some with as few as 5 or as many as 70. I then added relevant blogs from those blogrolls to my list, looking through their own blogrolls, and so on. (Many blogrolls had not been recently updated, which resulted in some cases in the majority of the blogs listed no longer being accessible online.) Some of the major trends of blog themes that I excluded from my search are described below.

It should be noted that any attempt to establish a comprehensive list of all relevant blogs will be at best incomplete, given the lack of any centralised database of every blog in existence, as well as the impracticality of sifting through search results for every possible combination of related terms. This is even more the case as time goes on, and new blogs are created that were not available in previous searches. Steven M. Schneider and Kirsten A. Foot (2005) have written about the “often rapid and unpredictable evolution of the web” as a major challenge for those doing research on the internet (p. 157), because of how quickly blogs can be created and then disappear or become inactive. These phenomena were very evident throughout the process of gathering lists of blogs, with a large number of blogs listed in blogrolls either having been deleted or having been made private through password protection.¹⁸ As an example of the constant changes in the blog landscape that I observed, one blog, Lucky Fatima (<http://luckyfatima.wordpress.com>), was active when I

¹⁸ In other words, these blogs now require a password to access their content; it is not possible to tell whether the private blogs are actually continuing to be updated for a select audience or whether the author has made it private so that only she can access it. I excluded private blogs from my study for two reasons. First, on a practical level, they are by definition more difficult to access. The second and more important reason is that I am interested in looking at blogs as publicly-available texts, which makes private blogs less relevant.

first looked at it in the summer of 2013, but when I went back in October of that year to examine it in more detail for consideration for the research, it had been made private. Of the 22 Muslim blogs listed as winners and honourable mentions in the 2004 Brass Crescent Awards, the first year that the awards existed, only 8 remain accessible online, and only one has been updated within the last year, again pointing to the short lives that many blogs have had. A search through the same blogrolls and awards list today would almost certainly find some new blogs and others that have become dormant since the initial search in 2013.

Still, this process of mapping existing blogs provided me with a list over 70 personal blogs written by Muslim women in North America¹⁹ who engage at least some of the time with questions of gender and religion, a number that includes only the blogs that remained active and accessible at the time that I was engaged in compiling this list. The blogs that were ultimately chosen for this project share a number of characteristics in terms of popularity (observed, for example, through frequent positive comments on posts and the blog's presence in others' blogrolls), activity, and longevity, while also reflecting a critical approach to gender issues that this dissertation investigates in more depth. The aim of this research is not to present a comprehensive picture of Muslim blogging, or even of Muslim women blogging in North America, and thus the dissertation will not enter into detail on the other kinds of blogs that exist within this sub-section of the category of Muslim-

¹⁹ Any identifying information about location, gender, and religious affiliation comes only through what is made available on the blogs, and thus is not always easy to ascertain. While the blogger's self-identification in terms of gender and religion was usually relatively straightforward, location information was often less immediately available, and further complicated in some cases by bloggers who had moved through the course of their blogging. On the other hand, part of the objective of this project was to look at writers who were speaking from positions as Muslim women in North America. Thus, the absence of explicit and active identification of the gender, location, or religion of the writer became a reason to exclude them from this dissertation.

authored blogs. Nevertheless, some of the broader trends will be described briefly here in order to provide a sense of the wider range of voices and diversity of experiences and relationships to Islam that may be found online. Some of the blogs mentioned here were counted among the 70 blogs mentioned above; others had less of a specific gender focus, and are included here to point to some of the themes that Muslim women bloggers address that will not be considered in depth within this dissertation.

- Muslim mommy blogs: For a number of Muslim women, the focus of their blogging is on motherhood and parenting Muslim children. Muslim mommy blogs like Happy Muslim Mama (<http://www.happymuslimah.com/>), American Muslim Mom (<http://americanmuslimmom.com/>) and Grow Mama Grow (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/growmama/>) cover topics such as how to teach children about Islam, how to instill spiritual values in children, and how to juggle identities as Muslim families in the West. Blogger Dilshad Ali at Muslimah Next Door (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/muslimahnextdoor/>) focuses many of her parenting reflections on the challenges of her eldest son's autism, and on the role that religion plays in helping her find hope and strength.
- Modest fashion blogs: Often heavy on images, these blogs provide suggestions for hijab-friendly fashion styles, including ideas for how to combine different articles of clothing together to create outfits that are stylish while conforming to the bloggers' understandings of modest and Islamically-appropriate standards of dress. Examples include HijabTrendz (<http://www.hijabtrendz.com/>) and Hijabi Style (<http://hijabistyle.blogspot.ca/>). Some fashion blogs, like Haute Hijab (<http://www.hautehijab.com/>), also serve as online retailers that sell scarves and

other hijab-friendly clothing. Several Muslim fashion bloggers also have YouTube channels where they demonstrate hijab wrapping techniques (Peterson, 2013).²⁰

- Convert blogs: Women who have converted to Islam are represented in disproportionately high numbers among North American Muslim bloggers. For many of these women, their blogs become a space for reflecting on the process of incorporating practices into their lives, and include their thoughts on religious beliefs and teachings, as well as experiences of navigating new cultural worlds, or in some cases, navigating interracial relationships and multicultural families. Examples include A Hotchpotch Hijabi in Italy (<http://www.interfaithramadan.com/>) and Confessions of a Multicultural Muslimah (<https://multiculturalmuslimah.wordpress.com/>). Of the bloggers in my study, Ify and Kirstin both identify as converts as well.
- Blogs identified as “traditional,” “orthodox,” or “Salafi”: A large number of Muslim women, such as One Chinese Muslimah (<http://www.onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.ca/>), Niqabi Nuances (<http://niqablovers.blogspot.ca/>), and Dear Little Auntie (<http://dearlittleauntie.blogspot.ca/>), blog about their lives and experiences (and provide advice, in the latter case) from within a religious framework that prioritises adherence to strict interpretations of religious principles and to scholars seen as traditional and authoritative. Although this may be better thought of as a sub-

²⁰ While clearly very popular, blogs of this kind (along with the hijab fashion trend as a whole) have also been critiqued for perpetuating pressures on young Muslim women to live up to certain beauty standards (Izzie, 2013); turning the headscarf into a fashion statement in ways that are seen to lessen its spiritual value; and holding a narrow definition of “Islamic” fashion that focuses only on covering and not on other questions such as the ethics involved in decisions about where clothing is purchased (Taha, 2013).

category within each of the above blog descriptions, it is highlighted here to emphasise that the feminist-leaning blogs examined in this study are not the only blogs in which women express thoughtful reflections on their religious practices, and that there is a wide range of conclusions women can reach when seriously reflecting on the ways they understand and practice Islam. As Saba Mahmood (2005) has shown in an offline context through her research on pious women activists in Egypt, liberal notions of agency and choice are complicated in cases where women actively take up perspectives seen by Western observers as restrictive or submissive. It is also important to avoid essentialising what it means to be “conservative” or assuming that this is necessarily anti-feminist; popular blogger Zainab Bint Yunus at The Salafi Feminist (<http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.ca/>) writes about wearing niqab (a face-veil) and often prioritising literalist textual interpretations, while considering how these interpretations might be used to fight against sexism and other inequalities in Muslim communities.

- Male feminist blogs: It is important to note that bloggers who write critically about issues of gender and religion are not exclusively women (and, as noted above, this is not a position that all women take). Bloggers such as Jehanzeb Dar (<https://muslimreverie.wordpress.com/>), HijabMan (<http://www.hijabman.com/>), and A Bengali in T.O. (<http://mezba.blogspot.ca/>) have all written extensively about gender issues within Muslim communities, such as unequal spaces for women in mosques and the problems with men policing women’s clothing. The focus of this dissertation reflects a political decision to centre women’s voices when it comes to

religious contexts that particularly affect women, but it should be emphasised that there is also a high degree of diversity among male bloggers, and that writing about gender issues with regard to religion (and from a feminist perspective) should not be entirely conflated with “women’s writing.”

As noted in the Introduction, the four blogs ultimately selected for this research were Freedom from the Forbidden, written by Shehnaz Haqqani, who writes as “Orbala” (<https://orbala.wordpress.com/>); Ify Okoye’s eponymous blog (<http://ifyokoye.com/>); the fatal feminist, written by Nahida Sultana Nisa (<http://thefatalfeminist.com/>); and wood turtle, written by Kirstin Dane (<https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/>). A number of criteria influenced the selection process that resulted in the selection of these four blogs as my terrain of research. All four blogs appear to have a broad and active readership, as suggested by the number of comments left on the blog posts by different commenters. They also appear in the blogrolls of other prominent blogs; most showed up in blogrolls of at least five of the other blogs that I came across in my searches, which is not an unusual number, but sets them apart from some of the blogs that seem less widely read or cited. Given the sense of appreciation, friendship, or community often indicated by the act of linking to other blogs (Rettberg, 2008, p. 60), the presence of these blogs in others’ blogrolls suggests a sense of connection or respect that other bloggers feel towards them.

Each of the selected blogs has been active for at least three years, providing a large body of content to analyse. The four blogs have all been active during a roughly similar time period, allowing for greater possibilities for comparison of conversations that have arisen on several blogs in response to the same context. In fact, each of these four bloggers has interacted in some way with at least one of the others through their blogs, either by

linking to each other's blogs, or by commenting on each other's posts. Nahida has written guest posts (a fairly common practice among bloggers) on wood turtle (Nahida, 30 May 2012), and has hosted a guest post by Shehnaz on her own blog (Orbala, 25 October 2014); Ify took part in a series of interviews about mosque spaces that was posted on wood turtle (wood turtle, 20 February 2013). In the time since my research began, Nahida and Shehnaz, who are both graduate students, have even met in person at the 2014 American Academy of Religion conference, which I also attended.²¹ Shehnaz describes the encounter in a blog post about a fundraising banquet for the Council on American-Islamic relations that she and Nahida attended together during the conference, and where, unsurprisingly, the two had significant critiques of the gender dynamics (Orbala, 14 December 2014).

I use the four blogs that I have chosen for this research project not as stand-ins for the entire Muslim blogging world but rather as case studies through which we may gain a greater understanding of the processes involved in their blogging practices, particularly with regard to questions of gender and Islam. Put another way, my aim is not to unearth an exhaustive list of all of the topics being discussed online, or of all of the possible perspectives, but rather to focus in on a few selected topics that are salient on all of the chosen blogs, in order to consider in more depth the ways that these topics are being discussed and debated, and the role of the online blog environment in shaping the conversations that take place.

²¹ While I spent time with both of them at the conference, the two of them had already been in touch with each other through their blogs, and had planned to meet at the conference independently of my connection with either one of them.

Some observations upon analysing the four blogs

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the questions I examined while studying these four blogs, and the reasons I decided to take the stories told on the blogs as my main focus of analysis. It is worthwhile, however, to begin with a broader picture of some of the other elements to consider when looking at blogs, and of how these apply to the four blogs selected here. The analysis in this dissertation is based primarily on the text of the blogs, looking mainly at what is written but with attention also to the images that accompany the texts, as well as conversations that arise in the comments on the blog posts. For each blog, I read through all articles that had been posted from when it was first created until the first week of May 2015.

As I read through the blogs, I categorised each blog post both according to theme and according to structural components: the presence of visual images, videos, or audio recordings; the use of quotes from or links to other articles or blog posts; the presence of trackbacks²² on the post, whether these came from other blogs or from the blogger herself referencing a past post of her own; and the number of comments left on each post. As of May 7, 2015, there were a total of 1993 posts published on the four blogs, including 530 on Ify Okoye (beginning in August 2006), 560 on Freedom from the Forbidden (beginning in January 2009), 415 on the fatal feminist (beginning in January 2011), and 488 on wood turtle (beginning in January 2009). The themes that arose most often across the four blogs related to the Qur'an (125 posts), hijab (115 posts), sexism (111 posts), mosques (104 posts), US politics (75 posts), and Islamophobia (77 posts). Some themes that represented a high percentage of the total number of blog posts were exclusive to only one of the blogs,

²² While trackbacks were visible on all of the blogs I studied, they were not available on Freedom from the Forbidden until the writer switched platforms (from Blogger to WordPress).

such as discussions of motherhood, which only arose on wood turtle – the only one of the bloggers who has children – and discussions of Pashtun identity, which arose only on Freedom from the Forbidden.

All four bloggers make use of the visual dimension of the blog space. Images are present on approximately one-sixth of Nahida's posts, one-fifth of Shehnaz's, one-third of Ify's, and two-thirds of Kirstin's. The presence of videos is much less common, although each of the bloggers does include videos occasionally. Nearly all of these videos, which include news pieces, religious lectures, or songs, are taken from existing online content produced by someone else, although Shehnaz and Kirstin both include occasional videos that they have created, Shehnaz of her niece and Kirstin of her daughters. Readers of the blogs are often actively engaged. Out of the total number of posts on all blogs, 60% have between one and ten comments, and a further 20% have no comments at all. Only about 7% of posts have more than twenty comments, and while Nahida's blog is the only one with no posts over 100 comments, hers has by far the most posts with over 20 comments. Trackbacks from other blogs were present on approximately 10% of the total blog posts; about 6% of the posts listed trackbacks from later posts written on the same blog.

Along with examining the blog posts, I also conducted interviews with each blogger as a way of bringing added depth and context to the analysis of the blog texts. With the exception of my interview with Kirstin, which took place in person in Toronto on December 18, 2013, the interviews took place over Skype in early 2014; I spoke to Nahida on January 22, Shehnaz on February 13, and Ify on March 4 of that year. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. I also conducted a shorter follow-up interview with Shehnaz

on April 9, 2016.²³ The interviews were semi-structured and included questions about when, how, and why the writer began blogging; how their blogging practices have changed since they began blogging; how their approaches to the topics that they cover have shifted over time; their decisions around using their real name or blogging under a pseudonym; their relationship to their commenters and readers; and what they identified as the main issues that they cover on their blog or that they see as priorities. Follow-up questions were posed to all of the bloggers by email to confirm or update information from the interviews.

The final selection of topics that will be elaborated in the second half of this dissertation reflects a combination of factors. These are topics that arose frequently on each of the blogs, reflecting a high level of investment for each of the bloggers, and allowing for a comparison of four different personal approaches, relationships, and sets of experiences with the issues. For Chapter 4, which looks at how the bloggers each address queer issues, the topic was also selected in part because it was identified in most of my interviews with the bloggers as one of their priorities when it comes to gender issues within Islam, highlighting this as an issue worthy of more attention. The topic also serves as an excellent case study to illustrate the bloggers' multifaceted approaches to religious interpretation through blogging, a framework that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. I made a conscious effort to direct attention to topics that are under-researched, to draw attention to themes significant to Muslim feminism that sometimes fly under the radar. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the use of blogs to tell personal stories,

²³ The purpose of this interview was to talk with Shehnaz about whether to refer to her with her real name or her blogging pseudonym (Orbala), and to ask her about how her feelings around writing under her real name have shifted since the last interview. This interview was shorter and more narrowly focused than the 2014 interview, and unless otherwise specified, all mentions of any interview conversations with Shehnaz refer to the earlier interview from February 2014 and not to this follow-up conversation.

share images, and interpret texts, while engaging with a public audience, reflects a range of ways that some Muslim feminists are engaging productively with questions of space, community, bodies, gender, and authority.

Chapter 2: *Tafsir* through Blogging

We may want to believe that Islamic law is solely from God, solely from the Qur'an, but that is not the reality because God hardly played a role in it. For God, the Shari'a is whatever is just, whatever is good; men have decided, and largely continue to decide, what exactly justice and good mean. There have been and continue to be multiple sources of Islamic law, and the Qur'an has been hardly a part of it, mainly because of how open it is to interpretation.... And believe it or not, circumstances and necessity are considered a source of Islamic law. It gets complicated here because every other Muslim then feels compelled to opine, "Yes, BUT! But only an authentic scholar can speak on that, not you," and it gets even more complicated because none of us can agree on what an "authentic scholar" means. (Orbala, 2 March 2015)

This chapter establishes a framework for understanding Muslim feminists' blogging practices as processes of religious interpretation. It begins with a look at the role of colonisation, along with transformations in education and in systems of Islamic authority. I also provide a background on Islamic legal reasoning, while acknowledging critiques of the narrow way that the term "Islamic" has come to be associated primarily (if not exclusively) with law in contemporary Muslim discourses. Following this, I draw attention to the often-overlooked role of gender in the development of Islamic law and Qur'anic exegesis, examining the growth of Muslim feminist academic literature in recent decades.

I propose the concept of “*tafsir* through blogging” as a lens through which to understand how the process of writing a personal blog both produces religious interpretations and communicates them to a public audience. The concept takes as its starting point Sa’diyya Shaikh’s (2007) writing on “*tafsir* through praxis,” a term she uses to describe women’s religious interpretations that are rooted in experience. *Tafsir* through blogging encompasses a number of factors related to the stories that are told on the blogs, the relationship of the content to the visual and structural elements of blogs, and the interactions that bloggers have with their readers. I argue that these factors all play significant roles in shaping the processes of religious interpretation that take place on these blogs. I note that the field of narrative analysis provides important tools for analysing stories and blog posts according to their thematic and performative elements.

Having established my focus as largely internal to Muslim communities, I acknowledge at the end of this chapter the role of Islamophobia in the larger North American context in also shaping the ways that Muslim feminists engage in the public sphere, and reject any attempts to describe these women as “good Muslims” in ways that reinforce widespread stereotypes of Muslims as violent and oppressive. At the end of the chapter, I briefly remark on the headscarf as a relevant but disproportionately emphasised topic, and therefore one that will not be treated further in this project.

“Islamic” laws, interpretation, and knowledge production

When talking about conceptualisations of Islamic knowledge and authority, it is important to consider key elements of Islamic authority around the world and how global systems of Western colonisation have affected Islamic systems of interpretation and

knowledge production. Islam differs from some other religious traditions in not having a centralised authority structure analogous to, for example, the role of the Pope in Catholicism (Turner, 2007, p. 120). Moreover, disagreement and contestation have always played fundamental roles in Islamic discursive traditions (Asad, 2009, p. 23; S. Ahmed, 2016). Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005) has described major transformations to Muslim religious authority and knowledge transmission brought about by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the legacy of Western colonialism. He argues that the subsequent disruption to earlier systems of jurisprudence, education, and knowledge production has resulted in a “vacuum” of religious authority, in which it became easier for a much wider range of people to proclaim themselves to be a qualified religious leader or scholar (p. 37). Dale F. Eickelman (1978) has discussed changes to systems of Islamic education in Muslim-majority countries under colonial rule, eventually leading to expanded conceptions of what it means to be qualified as an authority in Islamic knowledge. Among other things, Eickelman notes that colonial powers in many places undermined the funding and thus the quality of Islamic educational institutions, leading to a decrease in the prestige associated with religious education, and a shift within many Islamic centres to European structures in order to compete. This also resulted in a move away from education focused on memorisation toward an emphasis on reading written materials, drastically shifting notions of what qualifies as Islamic knowledge and who can possess it.

Ayesha S. Chaudhry (2013) explains that a further legacy of colonialism is a sense of rupture with an imagined untainted past to which it is impossible to return. This creates in some Muslim discourses an impression of the pre-colonial period as embodying a purer Islam, while collapsing some of the shifts and disjunctures that occurred during that period

and since (p. 16). Such discourses echo Orientalist assumptions about historical Muslim societies being relatively homogenous across time and space (Said, 1978). Leila Ahmed (1992) also points out that appeals to “authentic” Islamic practices located in the past are often responses to (and rejections of) the impact of colonisation on many Muslim societies, and often place women in a role of upholding cultural purity (p. 237).

Two points are important in this discussion of how knowledge and authority are validated within contemporary Muslim contexts. Firstly, even movements that identify themselves as “conservative,” “orthodox,” or “traditional” are nonetheless inescapably shaped by a particularly modern context even as their legitimacy is claimed in part through appeals to continuity with the past. Secondly, the “vacuum” of authority to which Abou El Fadl refers has allowed Muslims from a wider array of perspectives to assert themselves and claim their own authority as interpreters of texts and laws. In today’s context, these perspectives can range all the way from those who identify as Salafi and reject a large portion of the historical body of Islamic scholarship as having moved too far away from the essential teachings of Islam, to those who call themselves progressives and also reject much of Islam’s dominant scholarship, on the basis of it being too deeply influenced by the sexism and other inequalities of the societies in which scholars have worked (Hammer, 2012, p. 104).

Because much of this dissertation focuses on Muslim feminist challenges to dominant discourses within contemporary North American Muslim communities, it is useful to note some of the dominant discourses and systems of knowledge production among Muslims, and specifically English-speaking Muslims in the West. Particularly important for what follows in this dissertation is the near-exclusive legal focus that has

come to define what is and is not “Islamic.” Shahab Ahmed (2016) writes that despite long histories of diverse and even contradictory ideas and practices being understood as “Islamic” within the fields of art, culture, philosophy, and so on, the term in a modern context is often used narrowly to refer to Islamic law (pp. 530-531). Although, like Ahmed, I am critical of the priority given to legal discourses in defining the “Islamic,” I briefly outline the field of Islamic jurisprudence here, because of the role it plays both generally in contemporary Muslim communities and specifically within the context of the bloggers (and their readers) studied in this dissertation.

Asifa Quraishi-Landes (2015) explains Islamic law in two ways: *sharia*, which she translates as “God’s Law” or “the way God advises people to live a virtuous life,” and *fiqh*, the “detailed legal rules” that scholars use to attempt to decipher God’s Law through a process of *ijtihad*, or legal reasoning (p. 554). Islamic *fiqh* methodologies take as their main textual sources the Qur’an, understood by Muslims to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and *hadiths*, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad compiled and transmitted by his contemporaries and subsequent generations.²⁴ Muslim jurists rely on these texts as well as work by other scholars, to make rulings about actions in a particular context, designating them as either permissible (*halal*) or impermissible (*haram*) (S. Ahmed, 2016, p. 531), and further specifying the classifications as “*wajib* (mandatory), *mandub* (recommended), *mubah* (neutral), *makruh* (discouraged), and *haram* (prohibited)” (Quraishi, 2008, p. 173). The designation of an action as legally permissible is not necessarily an endorsement of that action from an ethical perspective; an act may be

²⁴ Although the text of the Qur’an is generally agreed upon by all Muslims, *hadith* collections are subject to much more debate, as individual *hadiths* may be designated as “sound” or “weak,” depending on the reliability of the narrators and the corroboration of the *hadith* by other accounts (Esposito, 2005, p. 80).

technically allowed without being the ideal course of action. In fact, some acts classified as permitted (whether actively or by default through lack of prohibition) within the foundational texts, such as slavery and concubinage, may be abhorrent to contemporary sensibilities (Ali, 2006).

At the same time, law is not the only determining factor in designating something as Islamic. S. Ahmed (2016) contends that a near-exclusive focus on law in defining the “Islamic” results in a “diminished capacity to *conceptualize contradiction and difference*” within Islam (p. 531). As Ahmed argues, histories of “*normative pluralism*” in Islam go beyond differences of opinion among *fiqh* scholars that were discussed above (p. 453). Ahmed proposes that we instead think of the “Islamic” as a “*multi-dimensional phenomenon*” (p. 363) involving hermeneutical engagement with Text (Qur’an and *hadiths*), Pre-Text (a term that Ahmed uses to designate that which is “*ontologically and alethically prior to the Text,*” encompassing signs of God found in nature, as well as philosophical or mystical conceptions of essential truths) (p. 347), and Con-Text (the ensemble of religious, cultural, and intellectual discourses shaping a given Muslim context) (p. 357). Such a framework encompasses not only legal but also philosophical, artistic, and mystical engagements with Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text, some of which may even contradict each other but are nonetheless arrived at through the use of “Islam” in this multidimensional understanding in order to make meaning. This broader understanding of Islam is in contrast to the trend in modern Muslim societies towards “conceiving of and living normative Islam primarily as hermeneutical engagement with Text of Revelation” (p. 515). It offers, however, a larger and more flexible framework within which to understand the work of the bloggers studied here.

Gender and Islamic knowledge production

Many Muslim scholars of gender in Islam have observed that the vast majority of authoritative and influential Islamic scholarship has been carried out by an elite of male scholars, insisting on an acknowledgement of the gendered location of those doing the scholarly work (Mernissi, 1991; Shaikh, 2012, 2013; Barlas, 2002). In fact, Chaudhry (2013) argues that “[there] is no aspect of Islam that is gender-neutral; everything is gendered, from sacred texts, theology, ethics, legal theory, jurisprudence to mystical expressions and the embodied experiences of believers” (p. 1). As Chaudhry observes, gender plays a central role even outside of discussions focused on “women in Islam.”

Leila Ahmed (2012) has distinguished between “textual Islam,” often seen as the exclusive domain of elite male scholars, and “the oral and ethical traditions of lived Islam” (p. 128). She contends that those focused on texts tie themselves more closely to “medieval texts” than to the Qur’an, and that developments in literacy have cemented the idea that written knowledge is more authoritative than oral traditions, which closes off other forms of knowledge (pp. 128-129), even though the Qur’an itself – literally, “the Recitation” – has long been primarily transmitted orally. A similar claim is made by miriam cooke (2001), who points out that informal oral traditions have often served as a form of religious transmission among women, even while they have gone unnoticed by men (p. 35). We may, following Talal Asad (2009), recognise the limitations of an approach distinguishing “great” (law-based and largely urban) from “little” (rural and rooted in customs) religious traditions, instead understanding them all within an Islamic discursive tradition where what is at stake are competing claims about correct beliefs and practices. At the same time,

it remains important to recognise the role of gender as it cuts through all of these traditions in delineating different forms of religious knowledge and authority.

Kecia Ali (2006) argues that social and cultural contexts play a key role in informing religious interpretations, alongside the more formal religious texts being interpreted (p. xvi). Shaikh (2012) underlines this argument, noting that feminist theories have rejected the suggestion that any knowledge can be generated entirely independently from the knower's subjective embodied location (p. 98). As Shaikh (2012) emphasises, critiquing histories of male dominance within Islamic traditions is a necessary project, one that is not about blaming past scholars but rather about acknowledging the role gender has played in the development of religious traditions, by (often unintentionally) privileging some perspectives while neglecting or erasing others (p. 26). Recent work by Muslim women has demonstrated particular suspicion (or rejection) of *hadith* literature, given the history of its compilation by mainly male scholars (Hammer, 2012, p. 69).²⁵ These writers point to the ways dominant text-based forms of Islamic knowledge production often obscure the role of extra-textual factors such as gendered location, class, and historical context that influenced how the texts themselves came to be. Moreover, they also draw attention to the value of making clear the social context of religious interpretations, as well as the importance of considering subjective experiences as integral to a broader understanding of how Islam is lived, understood, and practised outside formal structures and traditions.

In fact, the role of gender in knowledge production arises as an issue within feminist work more broadly. In Chapter 1, I briefly discussed the ways personal blogging, with its

²⁵ Similar histories are present in many other religions, as are feminist re-readings of such histories. See, for example, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2005) on Sikhism; Plaskow (2005) on Judaism; and Fiorenza (1992) and Ruether (1993) on Christianity.

links to other forms of self-expression (such as diaries) associated with women and femininity, may be seen as less authoritative than other forms of writing that tend to be seen as objective or neutral (Page, 2011; Harris, 2008). While these divisions have never been so stark in reality, the associations made along gendered lines continue to inform how knowledge is understood and valued in a number of fields. Feminist researchers have challenged these associations, on the grounds that supposedly objective claims are never as disinterested or removed from experience as some may claim (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 56), and that systems of knowledge in which the most authoritative accounts are those seen as impartial and removed are in fact culture-specific and often Eurocentric (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224). Moreover, feminist scholars have also claimed the value of looking at experience and embodiment as legitimate sources of knowledge. Chandra Mohanty (2003), for example, argues for the value of examining “the micropolitics of everyday life,” looking at the ways that small, everyday experiences help us understand the impact of larger institutions of power in people’s lives (p. 229). (Both the advantages and the limitations of such an approach will be considered at much more length throughout this chapter.)

Critiques of the role of gender in knowledge production have informed a growing body of work on issues of gender within conversations on Islam, scholarship, and authority. Amina Wadud’s (1999) landmark book *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* challenges patriarchal readings of the Qur’an as thoroughly incompatible with God’s will, using a hermeneutical approach to reading verses linked to gender through the lens of other principles such as justice, equality, and God’s fierce hatred of oppression, as they are established in the Qur’an. Asma Barlas (2002) takes a similar approach in her book *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of*

the *Qur'an*, in which she challenges male-dominated histories and techniques of Qur'anic exegesis. In *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Fatima Mernissi (1991) examines the processes through which the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad were compiled after his death. In so doing, Mernissi challenges the *hadiths* that have come to be seen as unquestionably authoritative by pointing to inconsistencies in content and to narrators whose reliability is questionable. Nimat Hafez Barazangi's *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (2004) provides pedagogical and analytical tools for both Muslim women and men to conceptualise gendered identities and relationships within an Islamic framework. Barazangi argues that women have legal rights to equal participation in Muslim societies, including rights to Islamic higher education and to interpret religious texts. More recent work on Islam and gender includes Ali's (2006) examination of gender and sexuality within the development of Islamic law, in which she asks critical questions about contentious issues including sex outside of marriage, queer relationships, and sexual slavery from Islamic legal and ethical perspectives. Shaikh's (2012) work on prominent Sufi figure Ibn Arabi proposes ways of rethinking gender identities and relationships. In her survey of historical and contemporary legal and exegetical understandings of the Qur'anic verse 4:34, infamously known as the "beating verse" and discussed in more detail later in this chapter (see p. 108), Chaudhry (2013) argues that the verse can be read in both sexist and non-sexist ways depending on the "idealized cosmology" of the interpreter: that is, their conception of how the world should be, or their "visions of the universe as it would exist if all humans submitted entirely to God's laws" (Chaudhry, 2013, p. 11). Juliane Hammer's (2012) study of the range of forms of activism among contemporary Muslim women in the United States

connects the academic work of some of the writers referenced above with Muslim feminist actions and activities within mosques and Muslim communities as well as in literature and through engagement with media.

Aysha A. Hidayatullah's (2014) recent book, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, traces the history of recent English-language Muslim feminist scholarship, mainly originating from the United States, affirming the value of this work while arguing for the need to push the field further if it is to survive. While acknowledging herself to be both personally and academically indebted to earlier work in Muslim feminism, Hidayatullah also points to some of the claims made in attempts to read the Qur'an from a feminist lens that she finds unconvincing and unlikely to withstand time and external scrutiny among larger Muslim communities. In some cases, for example, Hidayatullah argues that feminist retranslations of contentious Qur'anic verses, while often compelling, sometimes rely on meanings that can easily be dismissed as forced or as too obscure (p. 135), and that may be "prone to apologia" (p. 174). Ali (2006) has similarly argued that an approach of selective rereadings of certain verses can be "both fundamentally dishonest and ultimately futile" (p. 153). Hidayatullah also criticises some Muslim feminists who claim that their readings or methodologies are the only "correct" ones, because of the interpretive diversity that this closes off (p. 148). She is further wary of interpretations that rest on notions of gender complementarity or on the idea that the Qur'an prescribes a trajectory towards justice in certain cases where, for example, it does not ban domestic violence outright. She points out that the promise of an eventual trajectory towards egalitarianism and non-violence does little to comfort women (or others) currently in situations of violence, and that a slow progression is simply not acceptable to all (pp. 136-137). Hidayatullah discusses these

ideas not only as unsatisfying to herself and to other Muslim feminists, but also as insufficiently persuasive within broader Muslim communities (p. 193).

Hidayatullah thus argues that Muslim feminists may need to search for new ways, beyond Islamic textual exegesis, to reconcile their commitments to Islam and to feminist principles of gender equality. She writes that this may entail a drastic shift in strategy toward acknowledging that the Qur'an may simply have its limits as a feminist text, and instead embracing "uncertainty as a mercy in the face of the daunting finality of certainty and the permanence of its limits" (p. 195). Hidayatullah's conceptualisation of this uncertainty not as a rejection of the Qur'an but as an affirmation of divine mercy locates her project within a framework of engagement with Islamic texts and principles (in S. Ahmed's [2016] terms, she is engaging with Pre-Text as well as Text), albeit in very different ways from some of the work that she critiques. This tension produced when remaining committed to finding answers within Islam while acknowledging the weaknesses of some of the existing attempts to do so – and the resulting reframing of "Islam" in which such answers can be sought – will be reflected in many of the blog posts considered in this dissertation.

Personal narratives in Islamic interpretation

For many of these scholars, it is clear that their processes of re-reading, un-reading, and uncovering are not simply academic exercises. Rather, they are often presented as the result of specific experiences of Muslim women, reflecting their deeply personal investments in rejecting oppressive and misogynistic readings of the texts that they hold dear. Mernissi begins her book *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) with an anecdote in

which she asks her grocer whether a woman can “be a leader of Muslims.” The grocer rejects the idea in shock, and another customer interjects with a *hadith* saying that “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity” (p. 1). Mernissi reflects on what it means that a *hadith* like this is not only popular and seen as undisputable but has also come to be used to challenge women’s authority even centuries later. She explains this moment as her impetus to learn more about the *hadith* itself (p. 2), and eventually to raise serious questions about (and in some cases, reject) some of the fundamental methods and historical figures of the canonical *hadith* compilations. In *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam*, Wadud (2006) weaves narratives of her own experiences into her examination of religious texts and their application within Muslim communities. Her look at conceptions of motherhood in *hadith* traditions, for example, frames it within Wadud’s own conflicted feelings about the tension between the exaltation of mothers within Islam and the lack of support that she and others have received (pp. 125-126).

More recently, in her book *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender*, Chaudhry (2013) examines historical and contemporary interpretations of the Qur’anic verse 4:34, which can be translated as:

Men are *qawwamun* (in authority) over women, because God has preferred some over others and because they spend of their wealth. Righteous women are obedient and guard in [their husbands’] absence what God would have them guard. Concerning those women from whom you fear *nushuz* (disobedience/rebellion), admonish them, and/or abandon them in bed, and/or

wa-dribuhunna (hit them). If they obey you, do not seek a means against them.

God is most High, Great. (Chaudhry, 2013, p. 2)²⁶

Verse 4:34 is often particularly difficult for many Muslim feminists (and others) to contend with, given its potential both to position men as superior to women and to give husbands permission to beat their wives. Chaudhry introduces her extensive academic study of the verse with a detailed personal narrative chronicling the development of her own relationship to the verse: her discomfort when she first encountered it as a middle schooler; her realisation, many years later, that the verse was indeed being used to justify domestic violence in her community; and her frustration with the male scholars she questioned about the verse, who repeatedly dismissed or downplayed her concerns, while affirming their own belief that the verse did indeed make it permissible for husbands to hit their wives, even as they tried to qualify that this would apply only in limited circumstances (p. 5).

Although the vast majority of Chaudhry's book is spent elaborating her rigorous examination of the many dimensions of the scholarship that surround this verse, and not her own personal history, this use of a personal narrative to ground her investigation is instructive. Chaudhry makes it clear that the stakes involved in her project are not simply abstract ones, and her relationship to the topic is not simply one of a researcher but also one of a Muslim woman for whom this verse has profound physical, emotional, and spiritual implications. Along with the writing of scholars such as L. Ahmed (2012), Wadud (2006) and Mernissi (1991), Chaudhry's work not only acknowledges that debates on

²⁶ This is the translation that Chaudhry provides in her book, based on a translation by Yusuf Ali, a prominent Qur'anic translator (thus reflecting a version of the verse that many English-speaking Muslims will have encountered at some point).

religious law and ethics have a very direct impact in the lives of religious adherents, but also highlights the importance of seeing such impacts as central when engaging in religious interpretation. The invocation of personal experience to introduce or support a particular argument is not new within feminist scholarship on religion (or, indeed, feminist scholarship on many other topics), but is nonetheless significant. At the same time, discussions of “women’s experience” also carry their own drawbacks and risks, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Personal religious narratives and *tafsir* through praxis

As the above scholars illustrate, the use of personal narratives within Muslim women’s writing on gender has often been considered in opposition to scholarship that is largely text-focused. Shaikh (2007) centres women’s lived experiences in her exploration of the interpretive practices in which women engage. She argues that a focus on women’s experiences reflects in part an effort to counterbalance the weight that has been historically accorded to “objective” interpretations associated with male scholars (p. 68). In rejecting the erasure of the specifically gendered location (and the significance thereof) of the predominantly elite male exegetes, Shaikh argues for the need to take seriously religious interpretations informed by the lived realities of women and other marginalised groups. She goes even to the point of referring to this practice as *tafsir*, a term often reserved for formal methodologies for Qur’anic exegesis, although Shahab Ahmed (2016) and Amir Latif (2009) have both underscored the ways that other forms of hermeneutical engagement with religious texts, such as poetry and creative writing, should also be

considered as *tafsir*. With reference to her interviews with a group of women survivors of domestic violence, Shaikh writes that

What they often emerge with is an understanding of Islam that provides a very different ethical and existential vision than that of traditional male scholars, their husbands, and clerics around them. By suggesting that their experiences constitute a mode of “*tafsir*,” I argue for a transformation and redefinition of traditional boundaries of what counts as Qur’anic exegesis. (p. 70)

To further explore this process, Shaikh proposes the terms “*tafsir* through praxis” and “embodied *tafsir*” in order to emphasise the role of lived experiences in the interpretation of Islamic scripture and ethics (p. 75). Shaikh’s claim is not that the women she studies are doing anything new by incorporating experience into their religious interpretation, but rather that experience and social location are always at play in their interpretive processes.

In her discussion of the concept of *tafsir* through praxis, Shaikh (2007) focuses on the experiences of women who have experienced domestic violence in relation to their understanding of the Qur’anic verse 4:34, which (as seen above) can be understood as permitting, or even encouraging, husbands to hit wives who “disobey.” Shaikh writes that the women she interviewed invoked their experiences with spousal abuse in different ways as they explained their understanding of the verse or of related concepts. In one example, an interviewee gave a copy of the Qur’an to a friend only after striking out verse 4:34, telling Shaikh that “After my experiences I just refuse to accept that Allah allows or condones violence against women” (quoted in Shaikh, 2007, p. 86). Another woman refused an imam’s request for her to sign papers that would have allowed custody and property rights to her ex-husband, a request that he had framed as her Islamic obligation

under *shari'ah* (Islamic law). The woman explained her refusal to sign the papers not as a rejection of *shari'ah* but as an affirmation of her own right not to expose her children to a violent person (p. 86). Writing about her interview participants, Shaikh notes that “their experiential ‘*tafsir*’ abrogated the... patriarchal readings of Q.4:34 that were reflected in the approach of some of the clerics” (p. 86).

Shaikh explains these stories as rooted in moments of “ideological rupture with the dominant patriarchal power structure that the women had hitherto tacitly accepted” (p. 88). Such moments prompted the women to challenge some of the principles that they had once seen as natural or beneficial. Experience, in this understanding, opens up opportunities for a more profound and critical interrogation of religious principles. For the women Shaikh interviewed, these opportunities allowed for the construction of a relationship with Islam based on their own sense of personal authority and ethics (p. 89).

In a similar vein, Hammer (2012) writes about “embodied *tafsir*,” elaborating on a term initially used by Shaikh, and referring to ways that religious (re)interpretation is carried out through actions performed physically. Hammer emphasises the ways that embodied performance of certain actions may also constitute a particular form of interpretive engagement with religious texts, taking as an example the 2005 mixed Friday prayer led by Amina Wadud. We might also consider as other examples the actions of women who have prayed in the men’s sections of their mosques (Hammer, 2012, p. 132; Wan & Laris, 2010). Through her discussion of this event as a form of embodied *tafsir*, Hammer characterises the prayer as “the translation and enactment of [Wadud’s] hermeneutical strategies into the bodily performance of a public, social, and religious ritual” (p. 57). Hammer also describes the prayer event as “an act of active and intentional

self-representation,” further highlighting its performative element (p. 153). Hammer’s focus is clearly on embodied *tafsir* as representing feminist reinterpretations of rulings or conventions around religious practice, although the term may occlude the ways many everyday religious rituals (such as the ritual daily prayers) physically put into practice a particular set of religious interpretations. While I find value in Hammer’s (and Shaikh’s) attention to physical performance as a way of developing and carrying out particular religious interpretations with regard to gender, I also acknowledge the many other ways that religious interpretations are physically carried out, including interpretations that are in line with dominant scholarly positions (and, indeed, nobody engaging in interpretive work is ever without a body).

Of course, the suggestion that religious practitioners regularly take action and make ethical decisions in response to the specific situations they encounter in their day-to-day life without, for example, stopping to look to the Qur’an for guidance is not a particularly groundbreaking one. The emphasis here, however, is on the value of paying attention to these decisions and actions as meaningful religious interpretive processes, especially in light of the gendered and other hierarchies that so often relegate authoritative religious interpretation to limited spheres that most people cannot access. Working from Hammer’s writing on embodied *tafsir* and Shaikh’s on *tafsir* through praxis, I look at the four blogs involved in this study through a lens I call “*tafsir* through blogging,” in order to better understand the religious interpretive work done by Muslim feminist bloggers. This framework incorporates an analysis of personal narratives of experience in blog posts, alongside an examination of other dimensions of blogging, including the use of visual images and the interactions that bloggers have with their audiences. Before proceeding

with an elaboration of the main characteristics of *tafsir* through blogging, however, I take a critical look at what it means to study “experience” and narratives thereof.

Limitations of looking at “women’s experience”

While it may be tempting to take narratives at face value as documentations of personal experiences and their interpretive weight, Joan W. Scott (1991) warns against “appeal[ing] to experience as uncontestable evidence” (p. 777). There is a need within these conversations to be careful about how terms such as “women” and “experience” (among others) are mobilised; Scott (1991) notes that looking at experience as such often means putting aside the ideological work that produced the positions from which subjects are speaking (p. 778). As Judith Butler (1992) points out, the moment that the category of “women” is invoked, a particular definition and understanding of that category is produced that should not be taken as a given (p. 15). Moreover, beyond the limitations involved in relying on the existence of a category of “women” whose experiences are being analysed, there are limitations inherent in the very assumption that “experience” is a useful or accessible object of analysis at all. As Scott (1991) writes, “[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted” (p. 797). She argues that the assumption that “experience” refers to some kind of essential truth ignores the ways experience itself is always accessed only through representation, and narratives of experience therefore should not be examined without considering the historical and discursive processes through which they are produced (p. 780). Focusing on individual experiences can also serve to draw attention away from collective struggles and efforts (Mohanty, 2003, p. 115).

An intersectional approach also reminds us of the multiple identities at stake in any kind of self-representation, and the impossibility of speaking only as a woman – or as a Muslim woman – without accounting for other coexisting identities. Within this dissertation, for instance, all four bloggers write as Muslim women, but this standpoint is inflected differently for each one based on race, immigration history, class, family situation, and numerous other factors. Thus, for example, Kirstin’s narratives of experience as a Muslim woman are entwined with her reflections on her whiteness as it relates to conversion and wearing a headscarf (wood turtle, 3 August 2009); Shehnaz’s are inextricable from her location as a Pashtun woman who came to the United States from Pakistan as a child (Orbala, 19 March 2015); Nahida’s are informed by the tensions she faced as a survivor of abuse within a society that she felt would blame her religion and not her abuser (the fatal feminist, 4 May 2011); and Ify’s are interwoven with her background as a Black woman facing anti-Black racism from within and outside of Muslim communities (Okoye, 15 September 2006; 15 June, 2008). Although this dissertation does not enter into a systemic intersectional analysis of all of the differences in social location among the four bloggers studied, it is important to keep in mind that these differences are significant, and that the bloggers’ writing is shaped not only by their position as Muslim women but also by other factors including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and many others. A more extensive analysis that centres intersectionality might raise insights about the implications of the bloggers’ different locations that extend beyond what arises within the dissertation

The danger of privileging certain “women’s” experiences and marginalising or erasing others is ever present, as some women are taken to represent womanhood as a whole and others are ignored or deemed unimportant (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Henderson,

1992). Further, taking “women” as the subjects of analysis must not assume there is a common political agenda that women share as a result of their membership in a common gendered category. Mohanty (2003) writes about the fallacy of what she calls the “feminist osmosis thesis,” or the assumption that all women will be feminists or will have a shared understanding of what it means to be a woman, simply by virtue of the gendered category to which they belong (p. 109). Hidayatullah (2014) makes a similar point when she refuses to frame her work as “‘women’s’ interpretations of the Qur’an,” noting that not all women have the same experiences or come to the same understandings, and more importantly, that not all women’s religious understandings are necessarily more favourable to women (or at least, not to all women) (p. 44). Even when it comes to attempts to “reclaim” the value of women’s religious traditions in contrast to text-based male-dominated interpretations, Ali (2006) points out that religious principles transmitted through oral traditions (the non-textual practices associated with women) are not necessarily less sexist or more empowering to women than conclusions arrived at through text-based legal methodologies (p. xx). Thus, while it may still be useful to invoke the category of “women” for political purposes, in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has referred to as “strategic essentialism” (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993, pp. 34-35)²⁷, it is important to emphasise that the category of “women” is much more expansive and messy than any neat label would suggest.

²⁷ Spivak actually notes that she has “given up” on the language of “strategic essentialism” as a phrase, because of the ways that it has come to be used with emphasis only on the dimension of “essentialism” and not on the element of “strategy,” but that this does not mean that she has abandoned the concept itself (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993, pp. 34-35). The phrase remains useful for my purposes, for which the “strategic” dimension is crucial.

In addition to the risks involved when examinations of experience obscure the ideological work involved in positioning the experiencing subject, Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us that there is no way to access “how life really is out there” as something to which accounts of experience can be compared; rather, it is only ever through representation that experience can be communicated (p. 473). And yet, even if we understand the stories *as* stories and take steps to avoid the trap of considering these narratives as stand-ins for “real” experiences, the use of narrative can nonetheless be problematic in other ways. There is a danger, as Langellier (1999) explains, of looking uncritically at personal narratives as reflecting only the person telling the story, without acknowledging the individual and the narrative as both being rooted in the cultural contexts in which they find themselves (p. 134). It is imperative to keep in mind, in other words, that the narrative is mediated not only by the person telling the story but by the environment in which they tell it, which for its part is shaped by language, culture, social expectations, and power relations, among other factors.

Experience also becomes problematic when those telling their stories take the role of “native informants,” attempting to represent for a Western audience a singular narrative of what happens to women in their cultural or religious groups, often reinforcing dominant Western narratives about the religious group and resulting in an expanded public platform to speak and publish their thoughts. This is a particularly salient recent trend among some Muslim (and ex-Muslim) women, such as Asra Nomani, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Djemila Benhabib, each of whom has written an autobiography and has been an active public figure denouncing Islam and Muslim communities (see, for example, Maira, 2009; Elkouri, 2012). Numerous scholars have critiqued these writers for the ways that their

personal narratives are used to fuel racist and imperialist discourses that aim to “save” Muslim women, and for portraying Muslim women who express different ideas and experiences as oppressed, brainwashed, or duplicitous (Shaikh, 2013; Maira, 2009; Razack, 2008). The relationship of these narratives to the “truth” of the experiences that inform them often becomes less relevant than the political work that such narratives do, underlining the risks involved in relying on experience without attention to its construction and context.

***Tafsir* through blogging**

When I interviewed Kirstin, she explained that, as her blogging practices and approaches to Islam evolved, she moved from “[deferring] to scholarly opinion” to a “[recognition] that women have the right to reinterpret things for themselves and in a way... that’s what we’re doing by writing.” Shehnaz explained in my interview with her that although she feels “the relationship between Islam and feminism is complicated,” she also believes “obviously that they’re compatible, when we use the interpretation argument, that Islam has been interpreted by men and has been dominated by men, and so... women should also be able to interpret it.” In this dissertation, I consider Muslim women’s personal blogs as sites where the narration of personal encounters and reflections, often shaped by a very clear and deliberate invocation of the writers’ gendered location as women within religious communities and spaces, becomes part of a practice of religious interpretation. Given the issues related to studying “experience” as discussed above, my aim in extending Shaikh’s concept of *tafsir* through praxis into the realm of blogging is not simply to apply her analysis of Muslim women’s interpretations through “experience” to

the stories that appear on blogs. Rather, while I acknowledge through my use of the term “*tafsir* through blogging” a continuity with Shaikh’s examination of feminist approaches to Muslim women’s religious interpretation, I move away from her focus on women’s experiences per se, and look instead at how a combination of textual, visual, and communal factors related to blogging, as I elaborate below, shape the interpretive work that takes place.

Although the terminology of “*tafsir*” suggests a focus on exegesis of the Qur’an, I use these frameworks more broadly to refer to interpretations not only of scripture but also of *hadiths*, religious jurisprudence, and also with reference to other cultural or community norms and expectations understood as religious virtues, such as maintaining modesty or avoiding *fitnah* (chaos or discord). (For that matter, despite their own use of the word “*tafsir*,” neither Shaikh nor Hammer is exclusively focused on scriptural exegesis.) I use the word as a reflection of the role of Shaikh’s writing in shaping the framework through which I study blogs in this dissertation, and as a reflection that, as S. Ahmed (2016) explains, *tafsir* can be conceptualised not only as a specific set of formal methodologies for scriptural reading but also as a broader “hermeneutical activity” (pp. 307-307).

Often, the process of *tafsir* through blogging reflects not only a rethinking of religious principles but also a practice through which the terms of the debate are challenged, as the very fact of which topics are raised – and in some cases, the extent of the colourful language used to discuss them – disrupts norms about which conversations can be publicly held. Rather than using the internet as a space to engage anonymously or on a solely intellectual plane, the bloggers I study tell stories about breastfeeding in the mosque, praying in the men’s section, being told their voices or bodies are too enticing to be publicly

displayed, responding to assumptions that their clothing covers or shows too much, and so on. Through recounting these stories, these bloggers use their online platforms to narrate gendered experiences in ways that challenge and reinterpret some of the systems and religious discourses that regulate women's bodies.

In what follows, I introduce some of the main practices that comprise *tafsir* through blogging, which I approach informed both by Shaikh's (2007) framework and by Scott's (1991)(and others') critique of the notion of experience. These elements include: the use of personal narratives; engagements with religious texts; interactions with audiences; the publishing of short, self-contained posts over long periods of time; the use of visual (and occasionally of audio and video) media; the harnessing of strong emotions as motivation for writing; and the use of blogs as a space for cultivating religious virtue. Together, these components paint a picture of the multiple dimensions of religious interpretation through blogging, one that will be further elaborated in the remaining three chapters of this dissertation with regard to the topics of menstruation, queer issues, and prayer spaces.

Personal narratives

Similar to the women interviewed by Shaikh, the bloggers in this dissertation often tell stories of personal experiences to explain the religious stances they have taken. For example, in a post on wood turtle about the ways her religious priorities and practices have shifted, Kirstin describes one moment that prompted a shift in how she understood gender relations within Islam (30 May 2010). Initially, after becoming Muslim, Kirstin had significantly limited her interactions with men, and while this was shifting somewhat at the time of the incident she describes, she "still wasn't in physical contact with men," out of a sense that this segregation was preferable from a religious point of view. Then, she writes,

“One night, one of my favorite students came in with a problem that affected him deeply. After chatting for about an hour, he burst into tears. So I did what any caring human would do: I hugged him.”

Kirstin’s description of the act of hugging her male student uses this moment to explain an on-the spot reinterpretation of some of the rules she had been following, pitting these rules against what she describes as the actions of a “caring human.” She positions this moment as a turning point in her religious evolution, opening up questions about what she saw as “hypocrisies” within her Muslim community at the time, where women’s bodies – and their mixed-gender interactions – were much highly more regulated and surveilled than men’s. This re-reading and re-thinking of religious principles is rooted here in a very embodied description of her experience and reaction, which is used to demonstrate the level of importance placed on following her own knowledge of what she feels to be right, rather than acting only out of what she has gleaned from scripture or from scholarly or community authorities.

Engagements with religious texts

In bringing attention to the role of personal narratives in religious interpretation, it is important to keep in mind Ali’s (2006) warnings against ignoring the historical jurisprudential interpretive processes and conclusions altogether, or assuming that interpretations that arise from women’s experiences and engagement are necessarily friendlier to women (p. xx). In fact, Ali argues that the established and entirely mainstream methods often associated with predominantly male scholars and correspondingly androcentric interpretations may also contain some tools to both legitimise and pave the way for textual engagement among feminist scholars. My intention in this dissertation,

therefore, is not to entirely replace more “traditional” textual interpretive engagements with interpretations based on personal stories, nor is it to suggest that moving away from established religious texts is necessarily a more feminist approach. Indeed, for many Muslim women, including the bloggers interviewed for this dissertation, developing their knowledge of religious texts is an important strategy, along with being an end in itself. Piela (2012), for example, makes a strong case for what is at stake in women’s reappropriation of more “traditional” textual religious sources, arguing that “study of Islamic sources is their best defence in the face of accusations against Islam and attempts to subject them to harmful, un-Islamic practices” (p. 60). Although the notion of studying Islamic sources as the “*best defence*” (emphasis added) may depend heavily on exactly what those sources are and what the individual’s relationship is to them, Piela’s comments here highlight the potential value of deep engagement with textual religious sources and power structures, in responding both to Islamophobia and to gendered oppression within Muslim communities.

As noted in Chapter 1, the internet has built upon previous transformations brought about by print culture and higher rates of literacy and education by making it incredibly easy to access countless religious texts that in earlier periods may have been available only to elites who had a certain level of education, as well as physical access to written documents. For the bloggers in this study, the internet provides not only a platform for expressing their thoughts and discussing them with readers, but also various ways of searching for and accessing information, including Qur’an translations and exegesis, *hadith* collections, and commentary on classical sources from a wide range of perspectives. While their methods of engaging with the content of the texts may be significantly different from

those associated with more “traditional” forms of scholarship and established interpretive methodologies, neither are they entirely rejecting the importance of these texts.²⁸ Rather, they invoke the texts within their discussions of religious principles, often proposing new interpretations of verses and concepts that challenge conventional understandings.

Nahida, for example, devotes an entire ongoing series of posts on her blog to re-readings of Qur’anic verses that she sees as having been “misunderstood” (the fatal feminist, n.d.a), including verses on polygamy (16 February 2011), gendered inheritance (8 May 2011), and other contentious issues. While she talks about rejecting the intrinsic authority often attributed to the *hadith* literature (23 May 2011), she does not ignore that body of literature entirely, quoting Prophetic *hadiths*, for example, in relation to menstruation (16 June 2011b). Not surprisingly, the interpretation of religious texts is often done in conjunction with the use of personal narratives to make a point. In a blog post about what gets designated as “*halal*” (permissible) or “*haram*” (forbidden) within Islam (the fatal feminist, 25 August 2011), Nahida focuses largely on exploring Qur’anic verses on the topic, emphasising in particular verses cautioning believers against conflating personal conclusions with divine commandments. In this case, Nahida frames her post around a largely academic and text-based question: what is it that designates something as permitted or forbidden according to Islam? And while she largely makes her point through citing religious texts, she also appeals to lived experience – her own and that of hypothetical readers and interlocutors. She writes,

²⁸ The relative importance that they attribute to these texts does vary. While some of the other bloggers cite *hadiths* without ever having much discussion about their origins or authenticity, Nahida identifies as a “Quranist” and explains that she rarely cites or engages with *hadiths*. She writes that she will “*shamelessly* pick and choose” when she does use *hadiths*, because of what she sees as inconsistencies in how the *hadith* collections were originally compiled (see Mernissi [1991]), and because she is content to instead rely mainly on the Qur’an for guidance (the fatal feminist, 23 May 2011).

They will tell you they can do what only God can do and judge the strength of your faith and pretend to know what weakens it (music! shaking hands with the opposite sex! exposed hair!) so that they may police you. And if you're a woman, they will tell you that you're being immodest in what you do or say as though they can read your mind.

It is both a violation of Islam and an *intrusive* violation of *you*. Seriously, if I'm not allowed to recite the Qur'an in public because some guy gets off from me reciting the Qur'an, there is something very, very wrong with him. And he's *telling* me this—he is *openly announcing to the world the sexual nature of the effects of my voice on him* and taking it a step forward to silence me—and it's *my* modesty at stake? (25 August 2011)

It is not clear from the post itself whether the example Nahida refers to – of being told she cannot recite Qur'an in public because it may be enticing to male listeners – is something that actually happened or simply an imagined experience based on what could happen within a framework where women are generally discouraged from reciting publicly for this reason. For her purposes, it appears not to matter, as its strategic value as a narrative remains the same. In any case, these paragraphs move her argument from a text-based argument about why certain actions are wrong (because they ascribe Divine intent to human-derived laws, in direct contravention of the Qur'anic principles Nahida cites) into a more personal narrative-based argument to make a similar point (because, texts aside, Nahida's argument is that it is she and other women who are being violated, and not only "Islam" as an abstract concept). The "violation" that Nahida describes is depicted as wrong and unjust in and of itself – with no need for textual proof to support the argument.

Nahida's exploration of religious texts works alongside personal narratives here for the purposes of arguing against certain dominant religious interpretations, and investing these arguments with legal and moral authority.

Conversations with a public audience

The role of the audiences and communities formed around each of these blogs brings an additional dimension to what it means to study writing as a process of religious interpretation when this writing is made publicly accessible. The blogs invite responses from readers in a number of ways. The most obvious opportunity for conversations is on the blogs themselves, where readers can leave a comment at the end of the posts, and can reply to comments that others have left. All the bloggers also have Twitter accounts,²⁹ and Shehnaz also has a public Facebook page for her blog.³⁰ While these social media platforms will not be addressed in detail here,³¹ it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted ways in which these writers engage their audiences.

Many posts on all four blogs have few or no comments, but when conversations do arise, they can take many forms. Often, comments are supportive, praising the writer for her insights or expressing relief at having found someone else who shares their perspective. Some readers ask questions, whether in apparently good-faith endeavours to understand more about the writer's perspective or in attempts to poke holes in the writer's argument. In some cases – especially on posts linked to more contentious religious themes

²⁹ These can be found, respectively, at <https://twitter.com/qrratugai> (Orbala), <https://twitter.com/NahidaNisa> and <https://twitter.com/haraammermaids> (Nahida), <https://twitter.com/IfyOk> (Ify), and <https://twitter.com/woodturtle> (Kirstin).

³⁰ Found at <https://www.facebook.com/Freedom-from-the-Forbidden-204458346238520/?fref=ts>.

³¹ The bloggers' Twitter feeds would no doubt also serve as a rich source of stories and statements to analyse, particularly when it comes to interactions among bloggers and readers. That said, the focus of this dissertation on the role of blogging as religious interpretation means that it is more fruitful to focus on the posts that appear on the blogs themselves.

– comments impart religious advice or seek to correct interpretations contained within the blog post. The most-read post on Freedom from the Forbidden, entitled “A List of Haraam Things” (Orbala, 10 May 2012), contains a tongue-in-cheek list of various things that Shehnaz has found labeled as “*haram*” on different Islamic websites. She writes that she finds these rulings “problematic,” and that the point of posting it is not to establish certain elements as being “*haram*,” but rather to “poke fun at some Muslims’ habit to make everything haraam.” Shehnaz told me in an interview that she eventually had to stop allowing comments on that post because people reading had “missed the point,” assuming that she herself was declaring these things forbidden, and wanting to engage in religious debates in order to argue about whether they were in fact allowed.

In some cases, being conscious of possible audience reactions leads writers to adopt a more careful or conciliatory approach. This is particularly true in Kirstin’s case. In my interview with her, Kirstin described herself as “risk-averse” and described her struggle to discuss issues that might be seen as controversial. Particularly conscious of the possibility of alienating more “conservative” readers, Kirstin noted in her interview that there are a number of principles in which she believes (such as the permissibility of queer sexualities) and issues about which she would like to write (such as her experiences having led mixed-gender prayer). However, she explained that she had not yet found a way to do so that maintains the “fine balance” she had created between writing about issues that matter to her and not risking upsetting her audience. She also referred to her location in relation to Muslim communities, noting that “as a white convert, I have no right to be saying anything about culture.” She explained that it is difficult to balance being “subsumed” into a community without wanting to appropriate another culture, and without wanting to come

across as judging those within it. In my interview with Shehnaz, she identified topics she avoided discussing on her blog because of the potential for backlash within her family and the broader Pashtun community. At other times, an awareness of the audience brings defiance rather than a desire to placate. Nahida writes that people may find her blog “scandalous,” and even encourages this, in one case posting a picture of brightly-coloured underwear, just in case the blog was not “scandalous *enough*” (24 March 2013). Her “message to Muslim men” (25 January 2011), described in my introductory chapter (briefly, “Shut the fuck up”), while not directly or only targeting blog readers, nonetheless reads as a declaration that alienating readers who disagree is not a particularly strong concern for Nahida.

Shehnaz attributed some of her growth as a writer to what she has learned from her readers, something she saw as unique to blogging. She told me in her interview that “[readers are] going to get personal with you, and you have to know how to handle that, so I’ve just learned so much from that experience, and I feel like I couldn’t have gotten that anywhere else.” She also noted that her impression of her audience created a greater sense of responsibility for the quality of her posts. She explained:

I’ve been asked a lot to write about politics, but... even though it’s just a blog and I can say whatever I want, I can just share my opinions... I could do that when I was a beginner blogger, but I think at this point, where I have an audience who is basically so used to expecting detailed opinionated pieces from me, like very educated opinionated pieces from me, and I’m not – I’m not well versed in politics.

This sense that her readers expect “very educated opinionated pieces” thus affects not only the format of her posts but also their content, as she shies away from topics where she feels she cannot live up to the standard her readers have come to expect.

Awareness of possible audience reactions can extend into offline realms as well. Kirstin explained to me in her interview that her parents and in-laws regularly read her blog, and that her in-laws had even “shared it amongst their affluent friends in the Middle East.” This led her to be more cautious about certain things that she wrote on the blog concerning family dynamics and personal experiences. She told me about one story she recounted on the blog about a painful past experience that her mother did not know about and “felt horrible” when she had read it. Thus, while Kirstin makes certain decisions about what to say or not to say with an awareness of the potential reactions from “strangers,” she also remains aware of the potential reactions from readers with whom she has pre-existing offline relationships. On the other hand, Ify told me about how “embarrassing” and “awkward” it is when she meets people in person who say that they read her blog, even responding with a half-joking “Don’t tell me that!” when I talked in the interview about having read through her blog for this dissertation, thus identifying myself as a member of her audience. She explained this discomfort as the result of a disconnect between face-to-face interactions and the process of writing, which for her is experienced as a solitary practice in a space where she feels “very free with [her] emotions,” and where she says things she is not sure she would say in other contexts. Ify described the interactions that she has with readers online as often being “nice” and even “helpful” in clarifying her writing and her ideas, but it seems that she prefers to keep a mental barrier between face-to-face interactions and those mediated by her blog. In Chapter 1 (see p. 58), I described Viviane

Serfaty's (2004) "veil" image, where blogging operates to convey a very selective image of the writer while obscuring other facets of her life. This image seems to operate in two directions here: while it allows Ify to present certain ideas and narratives while keeping others hidden, it also allows her to maintain a selective mental image of her audience, keeping aspects of its presence hidden so that she is able to write with a greater sense of intimacy.

Jill Walker Rettberg (2008) explains that "Regular readers come to know the characters and places in the blogger's life, and easily forget that there are also myriad experiences and thoughts that the blogger deliberately doesn't share on his or her blog" (p. 120). At times, the interactions with readers and commenters reflect an investment on the part of the readers in the writer's life, and because of this sense of investment and connection, in what they feel that the writers *should* be talking about. Ify spoke in particular during her interview about the "conservative talking points" to which she felt pressured from her readers to adhere. While this pressure may at least in part be attributed to a perception of what people's reactions would be, rather than reactions she actually encountered, some of the blog comments do seem to hold her to particular standards, or to express dismay when she seems to fall short. Ify mentioned to me in our interview that she had spoken to a religious teacher after publishing the post in which she had come out as gay, and the teacher criticised her for not citing the Qur'an or *hadith* literature in that post, while on the other hand including a quote from media figure Rachel Maddow on the importance of coming out (21 August 2012). Similarly, a commenter identified as "someoneoutthere:)" left a response to the same post: "I just want to remind you to look into yourself, without labeling, and master whatever it is that is bothering you-

all while having the Qur'an and Sunnah as your reference, not your/someone else's opinions." While both of these exchanges can be taken simply as attempts to impart religious advice, they also suggest that, in the opinion of these particular readers, Ify was not including the "right" content in her writing about queer issues. Ify explained that, in response to this kind of critique, she felt a constant need to "clarify" her position, even though she also felt that such "clarifications" largely involved restating positions that she had already articulated. These examples demonstrate not only that Ify is aware of her audience, but also that her audience is far from passive, encouraging (and sometimes even demanding) her to respond to, refer to, or account for particular sources, experiences, or opinions.

All of these examples suggest a level of investment that readers appear to feel in the bloggers' lives, whether seeing them as sources of authority and wisdom, or as fellow believers to whom they owe advice, guidance, or messages of support. In this way, their blogs often represent a very different kind of public sphere from that described by Habermas (1991), whose conceptualisation focuses on reasoned debate among strangers. This reader participation in turn colours the way the writers communicate publicly on their blogs, as an awareness of their audience and of potential reactions influences both the content of their writing and the form it takes.

For all four of these bloggers, connections formed through the blogs have gone beyond conversations publicly visible in the blogs' comment sections or over Twitter. Each blog also has an email addresses or a contact form available, allowing readers to contact the blogger privately. In some cases, this private interaction takes the form of asking for advice. Kirstin told me about a woman living in Zanzibar who had recently become Muslim

and had emailed Kirstin to ask questions about wearing hijab and relating to Muslim communities. Shehnaz also mentioned women contacting her for religious advice, such as a Muslim woman who asked if she could marry her Christian boyfriend. At other times, email has served as a way for readers to privately *give* (often unsolicited) advice to the bloggers, as Ify had experienced after publishing her “coming out” post, although she also noted that she received many private messages of support and encouragement as well. Kirstin talked about the friendship and support that she had received from some of her online readers, including care packages sent to her after her second daughter was born (which also indicates more extended interactions off the blog, since Kirstin’s mailing address is not available on her blog, and anyone mailing gifts to her would presumably have had to ask her for it, and to trust that she knew them well enough to provide it). This support goes in both directions; in my interview with her, Kirstin described a kind of spiritual responsibility to her readers, noting that as she “[renews her] intention when it comes to blogging,” she includes “asking Allah to help guide and bless and take care of people,” even to the point of occasionally including her readers as part of nighttime prayers with her children, “once in a while, you know, just in case, right?” As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, blogging has become a source of community for many of these women. Shehnaz in particular talked about how she did not feel that her family and local community shared her religious opinions, and how the relationships she formed online were some of the first ones where she felt connected to people who understood her perspective – a discovery that she described as “the happiest thing for [her].”

Thus, *tafsir* through blogging is both rooted in a sense of relationship and connection to readers and a key factor in building stronger connections between bloggers

and their audiences. The awareness of the audience shapes the content that is discussed, the challenges the writers anticipate, and the way they establish their authority and credibility. It also turns the process of religious interpretation into a collaborative process, as will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

Writing in short episodes over long periods

In Chapter 1, I described some of the main characteristics of most blogs, including self-contained episodic posts that often do not follow directly from each other, and that may be posted sporadically, with a frequency that varies dramatically over time. This practice of sharing short vignettes over a long period results in a sometimes fragmented picture when posts are read together, particularly as the open-ended nature of blogs does not require any neat narrative arc (Rettberg, 2008; Serfaty, 2003, 2004). Older posts, even posts that represent ideas that the bloggers no longer hold, remain available as an archive of the blogger's publicly stated opinion at a given point in time. Posts that disagree with one another may remain simultaneously available on the blog without any necessary explanation from the blogger about the progression from one opinion to another. Thus, an examination of *tafsir* through blogging may uncover multiple posts in which the blogger shares her opinion on a particular issue, potentially reflecting inconsistent or opposite perspectives on the issue.

On one post (Okoye, 21 April 2011) about an NPR story featuring women who had stopped wearing hijab, a commenter identified as "Amal" left a comment disagreeing with Ify's positive reaction to the article, instead arguing that the hijab is a religious obligation that women should not abandon. When Ify restated her own position, Amal left another comment quoting Ify's own words from a comment on a post more than four years earlier,

in which she had talked about the positive value and importance of hijab for her. The comment section of this particular blog post includes a number of other contributions, but Amal's invocation of Ify's own earlier position suggests an attempt to hold Ify to her earlier opinions on the headscarf. This access to the blog archive affects the terms of the debate itself, allowing readers to use the bloggers' own earlier opinions as evidence in support of their arguments. As the bloggers develop their positions over time, they may find themselves held accountable not only to their readers or to the broader context of public debates on a given issue, but also to their own past selves, and the positions they previously held that remain publicly accessible. At the same time, the context of the blog means that, although the bloggers' past opinions are publicly available, the posts are still published independently of one another. With the format of blog posts allowing for ideas to be posted without necessitating explanations of how they relate to other posts the blogger has written, and with no outside editorial control imposing a requirement for coherence or consistency of position, the bloggers' posts reflect the evolution of their positions, and may even contradict or abrogate their earlier ideas.

Although, as in the example above, the ongoing persistence of earlier writing can lead to moments of awkwardness or disconnect for some of the writers, it can also be seen as an advantage. Shehnaz told me in her interview that, in contrast to something like Facebook, where "you write a post and then it's dead after, you know, the first couple of days that it's getting active responses," she felt she "needed a platform where... people would come to, they could look for something on Google and they would find that, that post... any time, any day they wanted, three, four years later, an archive where they could actually say, let me see what she wrote in 2010." Similarly, Nahida told me she chose

blogging in part because she “wanted a feeling of permanence,” unlike paper diaries or diaries based on a single computer that might crash. For these bloggers, the value of continued access to older blog posts seems to outweigh the possible contradictions between older posts and their current positions.

In many cases, earlier postings of subsequently rejected ideas also led into a discussion in my interviews about what it means for past outbursts of anger – or moments of certainty on issues that now seem less clear – to remain archived online for years after the fact. All of these writers told me that they see themselves as having shifted their thinking over time, and it is perhaps typical to always understand ourselves as having more wisdom at present than we did at earlier points in our lives. Still, most of their past posts remain online, regardless of whether they might phrase things differently today, and even though some of these postings offer perspectives with which they now vehemently disagree. Perhaps the most striking example is Ify’s post about the controversial public figure Irshad Manji (23 January 2007), discussed in more detail below (see p. 141). Although Ify did post a comment on that post several years later, noting that she no longer stood by the arguments expressed in the original post, it remains available online for people to see, and anyone who comes across it without reading the comments (or Ify’s more recent blog posts) would come away with a significantly different portrait of Ify from that of her current self-portrayal. Ify explained in the interview that, while she was “embarrassed” about some of her earlier posts, she was not “ashamed” of them, nor of their continued online presence, noting that she is “just a human being” and that the posts reflect an honest “journey,” a process and history of how she came to see and represent herself. At the time that I interviewed Nahida in early 2014, her blog had been largely inactive for

some time, although she began writing more regularly again a few months later. In the interview, I asked her if she ever saw herself taking the blog down, particularly if her opinions evolved in ways that were no longer reflected in the blog posts. She responded that she did not see herself removing the blog, and that the strong opinions often expressed in it still held value even if she later came to see things in a more nuanced way. Blogging thus becomes a way of documenting shifts in opinion and perspective, tracing how the bloggers' ideas and expressions have changed over time, and in some cases, allowing us to identify particular stories that have engendered shifts in ideas and interpretations as their telling has evolved.

Multimedia dimensions

Although many blogs are organised primarily around written text, blogs also allow for communication through photographs, drawings, diagrams, audio recordings, and videos. In Chapters 3 and 5, I look at the bloggers' use of photographs, in the first instance as a challenge to discourses about keeping stories about menstruation hidden, and in the second as a way of documenting women's prayer spaces in mosques around the world, and making them visible to the men who would usually be excluded from them. The use of multimedia on blogs is not limited, however, to visual images. Nahida, for example, includes occasional audio recordings. Most notable are recordings in which she recites the *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer (the fatal feminist, 17 July 2012), and the *fatiha*, the opening chapter from the Qur'an (19 July 2012). On one level, this act allows Nahida to share elements of her religious practice with her readers, who leave comments about how much her recitation touched them. Moreover, while Nahida does not address the topic directly in either of these posts, she has elsewhere talked about religious discourses that

claim that women's voices should not be heard in public, such as in the post cited on pages 123-124, where she vehemently challenges the suggestion that it is her responsibility to avoid reciting the Qur'an in public to protect men who may become aroused upon hearing her (25 August 2011). Thus, Nahida's use of audio recordings serves as an expression of her own interpretation and practice with regard to the public presence of her voice, using it as an invitation to readers to share in the beauty of the words and the voice that shares them.

Driven by emotion

As was reflected in several of the interviews, decisions made by the writers about when to write and what to write about often seem to have been informed by passionate emotional responses to particular experiences. This point offers additional insight in relation to the role of blogging in religious interpretation, a process that – at least in some cases – is most likely to take place when the blogger is feeling especially strong emotions on a given issue. In my interview with Shehnaz, she talked about how her early writing on online discussion boards (before she started her own blog) was often prompted by a compulsion to correct every misconception about Islam that she saw, whether it came from a Muslim or from a non-Muslim. She drew my attention to one of her blog posts (Orbala, 28 February 2012), in which she had shared a comic she had found online, with one character telling the other that they could not yet come to bed because “someone is wrong on the internet.” Laughing with recognition, she explained that she could clearly see her past self in the image. While she had let go of some of that compulsion to correct every “wrong” message, she still identified her earlier zeal as a major factor in her past online activity: a passion to protect and promote what she then saw as the “correct” meanings and

understandings of Islam. Although Shehnaz's religious perspectives have changed significantly, many of her posts reflect a fierce sense of indignation that likely influences the content she chooses to present as well as the ways she presents it.

In a blog post published shortly after my interview with her, Ify reflected on her reasons for blogging less frequently:³²

Someone recently asked me why I haven't been blogging as much as I used to in the past. Several reasons come to mind, which include the increase in other social media outlets. But I think at a deeper level, I haven't been writing as much because I'm at a better and healthier place, emotionally and spiritually. I've realized some of my best blogging (cue the [Penalty Box](#) post) has come from a place of (hopefully righteous) anger at injustice.

And while I still get angry at injustice, I think I've found a number of constructive ways to channel that anger into positive outcomes. I'm also living in the beauty of the grays, no longer willing to parrot the mostly black and white moral certainties of conservative orthodoxy... (Okoye, 16 March 2014)

As Ify explained, her motivation in some of her earlier posts came not only from strong emotion but from a more "black and white" mindset than the one she currently holds. Nahida, too, talked in her interview about the role of strong emotions and binary thinking in prompting some of her writing. While she considered her more recent posts to be more measured and less angry, she was clear that she does not regret the angrier tone of some earlier posts. She spoke in her interview with me about how people "tend to become a little

³² Ify told me over Twitter that part of these reflections were in response to my questions to her; in other words, I am the "someone" referred to in the first sentence.

bit softer” as their ideas evolve, losing some of their “black and white” thinking. But she also noted,

I think we need people who are passionate enough to see things in black and white, because sometimes that’s when things are the clearest. Because you have all of this detail... it’s not as simplistic as you’re making it, and you can know that, but in the end that’s not what gets the work done. And so I think it’s important to – to know that you have to be radical when you need to be, and no matter how much you... evolve on things, and you sort of take into consideration more and more the fact that people aren’t inherently evil [laughs], that sometimes you just – you need to see things in black and white for the sake of calling out, of calling it what it is.

In Nahida’s experience, this passion has served both in motivating her to write and in shaping the content of her posts, a direct and vocal “calling out” of what she sees as wrong.

While Kirstin, for her part, did not explicitly name a history of feelings of indignation and anger as a source of fuel for some of her earlier posts, she does talk in one of her later posts about feeling less sure of herself (wood turtle, 2 July 2014), over a time period that seems to coincide with a significant reduction in her writing frequency. While this time period also included many other changes (wood turtle, 12 May 2014), Kirstin’s writing about her lack of certainty echoes the experiences of the other bloggers: that motivation for writing comes more easily, and that the writing topics are clearer, when the writer is coming from a place of conviction.

If a large proportion of what gets discussed on the blog is fuelled by strong belief and emotion, we can surmise that there may be any number of other experiences that go

unaddressed, either because the writer is uninterested in discussing them, or because, even with important topics, the writer's feelings may be too messy or complicated to fit easily into a blog post. In other words, the flip side of the issues that are highly represented because of the bloggers' strong feelings is the relative absence on the blogs of other issues they are unwilling or feel unable to write about. Shehnaz told me, for example, that she does not often write about women's spaces in mosques because the emotion she feels about the topic is *too* strong, and that writing about it would be too upsetting. Even here it would be a mistake to assume that the most passionate-sounding posts reflect the only topics about which the writers experience strong emotions.

Other topics may be absent from the blogs for other personal reasons. A post published by Shehnaz on New Year's Day at the beginning of 2015 states that "I've never been as anxious for a year to be over as I was for 2014. It was the most miserable, most stressful year of my life, and I pray no one ever go through such a year, ever" (Orbala, 1 January 2015). She gives some hints as to what some of those "stressful" events were, such as some political problems that arose when she was on an international study trip in Oman, which she had also alluded to in an earlier post (Orbala, 1 September 2014). But other difficult things to which she alludes are not explained at all; they are simply referred to as "bad things" that began in February and created "hell" for months after that. And yet, the blog posts from February 2014 and the months following reflect nothing of this "hell." The difficulties that Shehnaz was experiencing during the time are not mentioned, and the blog instead talks about the usual range of topics: sexism, Pashtun culture, and so on. It is not surprising that Shehnaz did not share the intimate details of this "terrible" year in the public forum of her blog, but her later reference to how bad the year had been for her is an

important reminder that there is much that blog readers may never know about, and that what does appear on the blog reflects a series of motivations and decisions about what to share (and what not to share). The topics that are reinterpreted as part of *tafsir* through blogging do not necessarily reflect only the issues of highest priority or even highest emotional intensity; the emotional weight of some topics may prevent them from being discussed in detail on the blogs. In other words, as the bloggers consider what they are and are not comfortable or able to express in a public forum, the emotional resonance of some of the topics interacts with public dimension of *tafsir* through blogging in determining which issues get discussed and reinterpreted.

Cultivation of religious virtue

I was particularly struck by a comment that Ify made in my interview, in which she spoke about how some of her religious perspectives had changed during the time that she was blogging. She mentioned in passing that, “I think I had very clear opinions, and I took these positions, and even when I didn’t fully believe the positions, I would still write it, because... I felt some allegiance to some conservative ideology or something.” When I asked her to elaborate on writing about positions that she “didn’t fully believe,” Ify explained that

[I went] from no Islam to Islam, and then like I end up in this conservative Islam...

The community I ended up in, and then I felt most at home in, and that was around me. And so then I just had to – I mean, I was young, I was 18, I just absorbed those opinions and those voices, even if I didn’t believe them... because that’s what’s socially acceptable... certain things aren’t acceptable to say in conservative communities, and so... I think there’s a lot of undermining of my

own critical thinking, and opinions, and people – because people were like, oh, that’s wrong, you know, that’s like some Western ideology, that’s not from Islam, that’s, you know, if you only had more faith, you would like be able to agree with us, that kind of thing.

In other words, she had felt that there was a certain set of ideals to which she had to adhere. As Ify explained, many of her early blog posts were attempts to say things that she felt she was supposed to say, although her current perspective seems to be one of ambivalence about how much of these ideas she ever fully accepted.

One particularly salient example was a blog post that Ify had written in 2007 about writer and activist Irshad Manji (Okoye, 23 January 2007), a controversial figure who has called for “reform” within Muslim communities, and has made enemies both among conservative Muslims who disagree that anything needs to be reformed and among progressive or feminist movements who reject Manji’s positioning of herself as a Muslim “native informant” who claims to speak for the entire community (El-Ariss, 2007). In the post, Ify criticises Manji’s understanding of Islam and her claims to speak for it. She also suggests that Manji – who identifies as a lesbian – should read some articles from a website for gay Muslims, linked in the post, that aims to “advise” gay Muslims, from a perspective that “homosexual activity is clearly forbidden in Islam.”³³ In the interview, Ify told me that this was a “painful” post to write at the time, given what she knew about her own sexual orientation. In fact, she even returned to the post in 2012 to leave a comment stating, “This post written five years ago makes me cringe, I’m thinking of deleting it. It’s not something I would have written or even agree with now.” Still, Ify explained to me that, when she

³³ The specific link that Ify provides is to an explanation of the site: <http://gaymuslims.wordpress.com/2006/12/06/before-commenting-angrily/>.

wrote the post, it expressed what she felt she had to say about Manji in order to portray a “socially acceptable” opinion within her “conservative” Muslim community.

In a blog post published shortly after our interview, Ify writes about “conservative orthodoxy” that “I don’t and maybe never really believed in [it], though God knows, I sincerely tried to believe and practice it” (Okoye, 16 March 2014). It would be too simplistic to assume that Ify’s current perspective is now entirely true or transparent, free of any attempts (whether deliberate or not) to portray herself in particular ways or to gloss over certain beliefs – or, for that matter, to assume that such transparency is something that could exist for anybody. Ify’s comments, however, illustrate some of the complexities involved in analysing blog writing, especially texts that depict personal experience in ways that resemble the style of a private diary, and thus are often presented as honest, real, and authentic. Noting the gap between what Ify wrote at the time and how she now says she was feeling, my intent is not to criticise her writing for being somehow inauthentic; rather, it is to highlight that an analysis of the writing on Ify’s blog – as with any other blog – is an examination of a particular and often very deliberate self-presentation.

Especially in the context of writing about religion, where the goal may be not only to portray but also to become a more virtuous religious self, blogging can become a means both of representing a particular religious perspective and of further cultivating certain ideals, habits, and beliefs. While the blog writing may reflect some aspects of the individual’s life and her social context, the possibility also exists that it can influence the writer’s life outside of her blog, and can even be deliberately used by the blogger in order to work towards that end. Saba Mahmood’s (2005) research on women in religious movements in Egypt is relevant here. Writing about women’s motivations for beginning to

wear the headscarf, Mahmood describes some women for whom the decision to wear the scarf was taken despite the fact that they did not feel they had achieved the level of modesty they felt the scarf should symbolise. She reports that for her informants, the headscarf became a way of cultivating that sense of modesty from the outside in; even if it felt inauthentic at first, the headscarf's external presence became a mechanism through which they could achieve a sense of transformation (p. 157).

Bloggging may serve a purpose similar to that of the practices described by Mahmood. In Ify's case, even if she was unsure whether she believed in what she was writing, particularly in some of her earlier posts, the process of writing those ideas as if she believed them can be read as a sincere effort to cultivate the sensibilities she was reflecting in her writing: a kind of "fake it 'til you make it" approach to religious bloggging. Although there are some perspectives Ify now claims never to have fully internalised, it is nonetheless significant to question whether other blog posts may also have come out of a desire (whether conscious or not) to cultivate particular religious sensibilities, what she described to me as an image of "orthodoxy." Moreover, this phenomenon calls our attention to what is produced through the process of writing about some of these topics, and to the blog writing as an ongoing, back-and-forth process, where the writing not only represents a (partial) image of the individual writer and her social context, but also plays a role in shaping and transforming the writer herself.

In her work on online diaries, Serfaty (2004) writes:

Making one's diary public from the outset might condemn the writer to rigid adherence to social codes. Being completely transparent to others, being subjected to maximum visibility can lead to so strong an internalization of social

conventions that writers can textualize nothing but the most conventional feelings, actions or thoughts. (p. 469)

Although Serfaty frames this “internalization of social conventions” as limitation for the writer, Ify’s early posts may suggest a very deliberate mobilisation of this phenomenon: a performance of public disclosure of her own religious perspectives and practices for the express purpose of holding herself accountable to certain conventions that she (perhaps along with her imagined audience) understands as ideal and desirable. Of course, although she describes herself as moving away from a certain kind of “orthodoxy” in recent posts, there may remain other social codes and expectations to which she is currently trying to adhere; Ify’s rupture with the social conventions she attempted to follow at earlier moments should not be taken as an indication that she no longer writes according to any social expectations at all. This kind of writing may not simply be a passive adherence to convention, as Serfaty’s words suggest, but can also be understood as an active attempt to internalise social convention, and to bring one’s experiences, reflections, and desires in line with the “rigid social codes” that the writer feels are the most virtuous or God-pleasing to follow. In this way, *tafsir* through blogging can make use of a particular configuration of personal narratives and a public audience in order to actively develop ethical sensibilities and practices in line with the interpretations that the blogger hopes to follow or believe.

Incorporating a narrative analysis

Heidi Campbell (2012) writes about “storied identity” as one of five fundamental characteristics of networked religion in contemporary society (p. 68), noting that such identities are cultivated through “processes of construction and performance” as users

“attempt to find and create coherence amidst the fluidity of the internet” (p. 71). Given the importance of stories in representing experiences and constructing identities online, I propose an approach to examining Muslim feminist bloggers’ online religious interpretations that borrows from the field of narrative analysis.³⁴ Working from earlier work by both Bauman and Labov, Kristin M. Langellier (1999) considers the distinction between “*narrative event*—the event in which the stories are told—and *narrated event*—the event recounted” (p. 131). Mapping these terms onto blog posts, we can consider the posts themselves as the narrative events, while the narrated events are the stories to which the bloggers refer in their writing. Catherine Kohler Riessman (2005) explains that texts can be identified as narratives through their “sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (p. 1). She also explains that narratives can be understood as “meaning-making units of discourse,” through which events and experiences are interpreted rather than reproduced (Riessman, 2001, p. 705), a characterisation shared by many others (Bruner, 2004, p. 708; Hilfinger Messias & DeJoseph, 2004, p. 44; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010, p. 2). Similarly, Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (1998) understand storytelling through which events and experiences are organised and made coherent (p. 166). They emphasise the need to consider the notion of “narrative practice,” which encompasses “simultaneously the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told” (p. 164). As Andrew C. Sparkes (2005) explains, narrative analysis considers “the ways in which stories about experience are presented, structured, and made

³⁴ I refer here to the field of narrative analysis used within qualitative social science research (Riessman, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Langellier, 1999), and not to the literary discipline of narratology that carries a more structural and formal focus in its attention to written narratives (see, for example, Bal, 1985).

to cohere, while also allowing us to maintain an awareness of the institutional and cultural conditions that shape this accomplishment” (p. 194). Narrative analysis thus focuses on the story itself and the practices and cultural context involved in its construction, rather than the experiences mediated by the narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010).

Many scholars have noted the particularly feminist principles that can be incorporated within narrative analysis. DeAnne K. Hilfinger Messias and Jeanne F. DeJoseph (2004) view feminist analysis as a dynamic research method that makes room for women’s interpretations of their own lives to be valued (p. 45) and that allows for collaboration between the researchers and their interlocutors in the interpretation of stories (p. 48). Narrative analysis can also serve as a mechanism for bringing attention to stories that may be overlooked or never told because their narrators come from marginalised groups (Riessman, 2001, p. 707). Telling personal stories, in this context, can take on an extra importance as narratives may be performed in order to reclaim identities and values often ignored in mainstream spaces (Langellier, 1999, p. 134), an observation reminiscent of the work of scholars on alternative media as discussed in Chapter 1 (Rodriguez, 2001).

Narrative analysis can take a number of forms. While some take an approach that focuses on language or on the plot of a story in terms of particular structural elements (Larty & Hamilton, 2011; Lempert, 1994), the focus in this research project will be instead on a combination of thematic and performative narrative analysis, in order to better understand what is being discussed as the writers engage in *tafsir* through blogging and what role their narratives play. A thematic approach involves a focus on content, and in

particular the identification of common or recurring themes and the analysis of their significance (Riessman, 2005, p. 3; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94).³⁵ As Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) point out, identifying a particular theme as relevant for further investigation and discussion need not be based only or primarily on quantitative observations – such as the number of times a given theme arises. Rather, they suggest that “the ‘keyness’ of a theme” can be determined by “whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In the context of this research project and my investigation of *tafsir* through blogging as it relates to the four Muslim feminist blogs I have selected, the themes that form the focus of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 – menstruation, queer issues, and prayer spaces – were selected not only because they arise repeatedly but also (and especially) because of their richness as reflections of some of the complex layers of the phenomenon of *tafsir* through blogging.

These layers come out not only in terms of the stories’ content, but also in the ways the stories are used by the bloggers as part of the arguments they make. Therefore, at the same time that I make use of a thematic approach to inform my selection and analysis of major topics that arise, I also employ a performative approach to consider in more depth the ways that these themes are narrated on the four blogs. This approach considers “strategy, situation, and social conventions” (Langellier, 1999, p. 128) as key components of personal stories, asking questions about what role the narrative is playing, how it is being used, and how it is shaped by the presence of an audience (Riessman, 2005; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). This perspective also takes into account the ways that personal

³⁵ In this way, a thematic narrative analysis shares some commonalities with a grounded theory approach, which also takes as its starting point the themes that arise repeatedly throughout the data, and working to analyse and make sense of these themes (Riessman, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010).

narratives shape and “[constitute] identities and experiences,” emphasising that the interplay between experiences and narratives thereof are not unidirectional (Langellier, 1999, p. 128). Instead, as noted above, telling the stories is itself a process of producing particular identities and understandings of experience (Scott, 1991).

Much of the existing research on narrative analysis focuses on stories obtained through interviews or oral histories. It should be obvious, however, that personal blogging is also a logical fit for an analysis of narratives and narrative practices, and that the performative dimension is especially relevant when we consider blogs as publicly-accessible texts where writers are aware of their audiences and regularly interacting with them through their comments. In examining the performative dimension of narratives on blogs, I am particularly interested in the ways stories are used to support a particular argument or point of view. An analysis of the blog narratives in relation to performance also involves the blogger’s awareness of their audiences, as well as their interactions with readers who actively respond through leaving comments.

I underscore here the implicit argument that the personal is political (and thus that it is relevant to look closely at personal narratives), as well as the flip side of this argument is also true, that the political is often also deeply personal. In other words, what might appear on the blogs as, for example, posts that focus entirely on textual interpretation, may also carry a particular personal weight, and may play a significant role in how the bloggers’ position their own identities and experiences, as was also seen above (see pp. 107-108) in an academic context in the personal anxiety provoked by a *hadith* in Mernissi (1991) and Qur’anic verse 4:34 in Chaudhry (2013). While the focus of my examination remains on the more obviously personal stories that the bloggers tell, the definition of what is “personal” is

often unclear, particularly when these “personal” stories are shared in such a public forum. Posts that do not appear on the surface as necessarily personal may nonetheless be integral to the blogger’s self-understanding and self-presentation.

I argue, then, that a focus on both the thematic and the performative elements of personal narratives serves as an effective way to examine the practice of *tafsir* through blogging. Through this framework, I ask: what are the issues that arise? How do the bloggers use personal narratives as part of their processes of religious interpretation? How does the performance of personal narratives and the ensuing interactions with audiences inform and shape the process of *tafsir* through blogging? Taking stories – which may be told in both words and visual images – as the focus of analysis, and understanding these stories as evolving conversations with an audience, offers tools toward a greater understanding of what may be accomplished through a practice of *tafsir* through blogging.

Muslim women’s blogging in a world of Islamophobia

It would be impossible – and irresponsible – to talk about the work of these Muslim feminist bloggers without acknowledging their location as Muslim women writing in a contemporary North American context, where Muslims are viewed with suspicion, and where Muslim communities are often depicted as uniquely and monolithically violent, sexist and misogynistic. Several writers have noted that Muslim feminists often risk having their voices co-opted by Islamophobic political or media figures, even when the activists in question do not support such figures or ideas (Syed, 2012; Zine, 2009; Hammer, 2012, 2016). Writing publicly about inequalities or about experiences of sexism opens the bloggers up to being positioned as “good Muslims”: the kind of Muslim who is seen as

acceptable to the West, as an immigrant who can be effectively assimilated and “saved” by the supposedly enlightened North American society (Thobani, 2007, p. 237), and as a “native informant” whose voice can be mobilised to lend greater credibility to Islamophobic sentiments by providing insider evidence about the threats posed by Islam and Muslims (Shaikh, 2013).

As Anna Piela (2012) describes, Muslim women writing online (and elsewhere) often end up caught between two different discourses: on one side, an Orientalist and often Islamophobic discourse about Muslim women that positions them as helpless and oppressed (or occasionally as seductive and duplicitous), and on the other side, a “conservative” religious discourse that can be sexist and restrictive. Piela points out that these two apparently oppositional discourses in fact have much in common; both serve to control Muslim women and deny them “their public agenda and voice” (p. 3). As a result, Muslim women find themselves needing to respond to and account for these discourses, and others, when engaging in the public sphere. Using terminology inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double critique,” cooke (2001) characterises this position as one of “multiple critique,” described as “a fluid discursive strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions,” where individuals respond to multiple communities, interlocutors, and systems of power (p. 113). cooke further points out that Muslim women may feel less comfortable critiquing sexism internal to Muslim communities when they feel “threatened” by Islamophobia (p. 136), a phenomenon that has also been observed in other communities facing racism (Jiwani, 2006, p. 123).

Each of the writers featured in this dissertation is aware that she is writing in a context of Islamophobia, and each rejects the assumption that all Muslims – or “Islam” as a

religion – are inherently more sexist than any other community. While this dissertation focuses primarily on the bloggers’ engagements with questions of gender within Muslim contexts, their awareness of the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim communities as a whole is also very much visible on all of the blogs. At times, this comes in the form of narratives of their own personal experiences of racism. Kirstin (22 March 2012) writes, for example, about being stared at and then verbally attacked, threatened, and called a “f***** terrorist” (among other things) in a coffee shop parking lot several years earlier. She concludes that this particular incident was specifically linked to the fact that she was wearing a headscarf, and that she was attacked for her “looks” as a Muslim. In the same post, she also talks about an incident some years earlier, before she had converted to Islam, in which she was physically and verbally attacked for dressing like a “punk” and having a shaved head. Reflecting on both of these experiences, as well as the “body policing” that she experiences at mosques, Kirstin comes to understand them all as emblematic of a social context in which “it’s permissible to enact violence against a woman when she doesn’t fit into a preconceived notion of what a woman should look like” (wood turtle, 22 March 2012), illustrating the interlocking relationships that exist among sexism, misogyny, and Islamophobia.

All of the bloggers also write about Islamophobia in relation to politics and media. Shehnaz has written about a *Newsweek* headline on “Muslim Rage” (which resulted in a mocking #MuslimRage hashtag in which Muslims tweeted about the things in their daily lives that make them angry) (Orbala, 17 September 2012) and about an anti-Islam and pro-Israel advertisement that was to appear in New York City subway stations (24 September 2012). Ify has written about racial profiling in several contexts, including that of young

Muslim men convicted of charges linked to terrorism (12 September 2006), and about smear campaigns that attempted to link Dr. Ingrid Mattson, then President of the Islamic Society of North America, to Hamas (18 January 2009). In these and many other posts, the writers demonstrate a significant preoccupation with the impact of anti-Muslim rhetoric within “mainstream” North American media and politics.

The implications of having to account for multiple discourses and systems of oppression are made devastatingly clear in one post by Nahida (4 May 2011), in which she responds to people making anti-Muslim comments under the guise of helping Muslim women – comments such as “It’s a fact that Muslims are from primitive cultures that are anti-woman!” and “Why don’t feminists recognize that women who call themselves Muslim have been brainwashed by evil Muslim men and are too stupid to think for themselves/choose their own religion?” After listing several examples of such comments, Nahida writes, under the heading “**The Effects of This in Reality**” (all bold text here is Nahida’s):

I was physically abused for 16 years, and am not out of danger. My two little brothers were also abused. I hadn’t done anything before then because I suspected irrelevant factors like religion and culture would be taken up in the “news” reports, thanks to dumbasses like you. **And I was right.** This was proven as soon as I began confiding in people. I wanted to protect my religion, a completely innocent bystander. And my mother, who was constantly assaulted herself by the same asshole. I was silent because I knew if I spoke out the blame would be placed on the religion instead of the actual criminal. If that meant I had to go, that was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

So, if you're going to trash my religion, stop acting like you care about my well-being or the well-being of Muslim women.

She further points out that "You are **reinforcing the notion that women don't count by neglecting to acknowledge that *I am Muslim too***" (the fatal feminist, 4 May 2011).

As noted above, the risk of exposing one's religious or cultural communities to racism and outside attacks is a factor that can prevent, or at the very least dissuade, women from speaking out against the violence or abuse they experience, which is not limited to Muslim women or communities. Nahida's story provides a clear illustration of the implications of these risks, both in the ways her attempts to raise the issue were derailed by people wanting to blame the entire religion, and in the ways these reactions erased Nahida's own position as a young woman for whom Islam was personally important. As Nahida further stresses, linking every example of violence committed by a Muslim to "religion" or "culture" also takes the emphasis off the individual perpetrator; in her words, "[you] are excusing the criminals by portraying them as brainwashed suckers who are not responsible for their own heinous actions." Nahida's description of the possible consequences when she or other Muslim women speak out against abuse should cause us to wonder whether there are issues that she or others are not writing about on their blogs – or are writing about only very cautiously – due to a sense of similar risks.

As described above, Muslim women writing about Islam may come up against the image of the "good Muslim": one who is loyal to the West, who avoids critique of Western politics, and who is willing to abandon certain religious or cultural principles in order to fit in. This, too, represents a delicate balancing act for many of these bloggers, who occasionally take steps to explicitly disavow the "good Muslim" image. Hammer (2012)

cautions that, for Muslim women gender activists in the United States writing about their experiences of sexism in Muslim communities,

Their progressive stances and values and their investment in their own 'liberation' make them recognizable as American and thus remotely familiar as well. The greatest danger in representational readings of American Muslim women's texts is, then, that, consciously or not, they reformulate and legitimize stereotypes of Muslim women outside North America who are still the 'other' women, oppressed, foreign, inaccessible, and silent. (p. 186)

Hammer's point reflects not only the challenges faced by the bloggers themselves in discussing religious issues while remaining aware of the ways they may be perceived, but also the potential ways that this dissertation itself may be interpreted. There is, indeed, a risk of reinforcing the notion that these bloggers are the "good Muslims" because of their willingness to recognise and condemn sexism within their religious communities, or that Muslim communities are inherently sexist in ways that other communities are not. To the latter point, I note that systems of sexism and of violence against women are universally present in all communities, even if they may differ in the exact shape they take, and that any discussion of these systems within Muslim communities should not be taken as a licence to allow violence in other communities to go unaddressed.

With regard to the suggestion that these bloggers are examples of the "good" kind of Muslim, representing exceptions to a still-unchallenged assumption that *most* Muslim women remain oppressed and uncritical of problems within Muslim communities, it should be affirmed that Muslim women are just as diverse and complex as any other population. Indeed, the diversity that exists – and has existed – within Muslim societies across time and

geographic location should serve as strong evidence against any claim that “the status of women within Islam” has any one meaning. The qualities of self-reflexivity I highlight among the four bloggers are not unique to them, or even to bloggers (or other Muslim women) who take an explicitly feminist perspective. Perhaps even more importantly, as will be explored in the coming chapters, these writers are actively searching for answers *within* religious texts, and for ways that they can feel more connected and present within Muslim communities. The concerns they express about certain interpretations of Islam or their own alienation from their communities should not be read as a rejection of Islam or of Muslim communities as a whole, but rather as indications of strong personal investments in those communities and traditions. These women make it clear that they view strength and liberation as coming from within Islam, in ways very much at odds with anti-Muslim agendas that would try to save them from their religion or their religious communities.

While my focus is largely on Islamic interpretations and intra-community conversations, it is essential to acknowledge that these conversations are happening publicly in a context where Islamophobia is so pervasive, and that this context necessarily has an impact on what is said and how. Thus, even as the proceeding analysis will look at *tafsir* through blogging largely as it relates to internal discussions among Muslims, the presence of Islamophobic discourses about women colours the world in which these bloggers are writing, and thus their own positioning in relation to their diverse readership.

Addressing (and moving past) the headscarf

One of the most obvious topics for many people in relation to gender and Islam might be that of the headscarf and of Muslim women’s clothing more broadly. As Masserat

Amir-Ebrahimi's (2008) work on Iranian women bloggers makes clear, there is much to be said within some Muslim contexts about the relationship among blogging, conceptions of private and public spaces, and veiling. The relevance of the headscarf is indeed noticeable within the blogs featured in this study as well, as bloggers discuss pressures within certain Muslim communities to cover their heads, pressures within North American society not to do so, and the complicated ways they position themselves within these frameworks.

Kirstin writes, for example, about the evolution of her personal understanding of the scarf she wears, from initially believing it to be religiously obligatory to coming to see it as having spiritual value while not necessarily being required (wood turtle, 2010, May 30).

She also writes about Islamophobic reactions she has encountered while wearing a headscarf (22 March 2012), and about the questions she has about what she will do once her young daughters are old enough to decide whether to cover their own heads (2 December 2010). Along with the post discussed above in which Ify writes about a NPR story on women who have removed their headscarves (Okoye, 21 April 2011), Ify has also written about the hijab in other contexts such as burqa bans (13 April 2011). Nahida writes that she does not have any particular reason for choosing not to wear the hijab, and that she rejects the suggestion that this choice should matter to anyone else (the fatal feminist, 16 August 2011). One of the most popular posts on Shehnaz's blog is a compilation of images that reflect what she refers to as "hijab-policing" to promote certain codes of dress (Orbala, 1 November 2014). In fact – and not surprisingly, given how often the hijab gets discussed in media and literature around Muslim women – headscarves and covering were the second-most commonly discussed topic across the four blogs (coming in behind the Qur'an and slightly ahead of mosques in the list of recurring topics). Frequently

at issue were some of the very questions most at stake in this dissertation: contestations of textual interpretations and of notions of public and private with regard to Muslim women and their bodies.

And yet, despite the continued presence of this topic on the blogs – or perhaps, in some ways, because of it – I am making the deliberate decision not to focus on the headscarf in this chapter or, for that matter, anywhere else in this dissertation. This move is intended not to deny the importance of the headscarf within debates on Islam and gender but rather to reject the idea that this should always be a (or the) main focus, at the expense of other issues that receive much less attention. While the subject of the headscarf does indeed provide a compelling illustration of blogs as a space to deliberate the conceptualisations of public and private that get imposed on Muslim women's bodies, it is not the only such illustration, and in fact, it is a topic that has already been studied extensively within research on Muslim women. This is not to diminish the value of much of the excellent and important research on veiling that exists (Yeğenoğlu, 1998; Scott, 2007; Tarlo, 2010). Still, I am deeply concerned that this repeated focus on headscarves and clothing in conversations about Muslim women also carries the risk of reinforcing this as *the* issue of concern for Muslim women, and as the primary question that should be studied. A number of the blog posts on this topic expressed some level of frustration that the issue continued to arise and that the writers felt compelled to address it (Orbala, 2 January 2011; the fatal feminist, 12 November 2014; wood turtle, 26 June 2012), indicating that their writing on this issue often had much more to do with a perceived need to respond to outside pressures and experiences than with the bloggers' own priorities with regard to the topics that most concern them. In fact, within the interviews that I conducted

with the bloggers, the topic barely arose at all, and never came up in response to any of my questions about the issues that they see as priorities to discuss on their blogs. At the same time, the fact that they do still take up the issue, however reluctantly, reflects a sense of obligation to take part in public conversations about Muslim women, and a possible sense of responsibility within a greater North American public sphere to respond to existing conversations about the headscarf.

Ultimately, the topic of the headscarf seems to be simply saturated; it seems hard to find anything new to say about veiling that has not already been said previously. More importantly, the continued focus on the question of hijab often distracts attention from some of the other issues that Muslim women experience and identify as central to their lives. In her writing on American Muslim women, Hammer (2012) makes the decision largely to avoid the topic of hijab in favour of other topics that are significant and often under-researched (p. 194). I take a similar position with my work, arguing, along with Hammer, that it is the role (and at times the responsibility) of the researcher to shift the agenda, particularly with questions of veiling that have already been so widely covered (so to speak). Given that it would be impossible to address every possible topic of relevance within one research project, I make the deliberate decision here to put the headscarf aside, not because it is irrelevant but because other topics of relevance that are too often put aside themselves deserve attention.

Chapter 3: Important Announcement: Periods, Purity, and Pushing Back

On June 16, 2011, Nahida Sultana Nisa, blogger at The Fatal Feminist, published a blog post entitled “Important Announcement: I am on my period.” Continuing from the title, the post begins,

It’s almost over actually, but someone tweeted today that her mother asked her, ‘Are you wearing nail polish to announce to the world that you’re menstruating?’

To which I personally would have answered:

Fuck yeah. (the fatal feminist, 16 June 2011a)

The piece continues with a discussion of how much she loves menstruating, followed by two photographs of colourfully-painted nails, and a note that she may do this every month.

The relationship of nail polish to menstruation, and of either of these to the present discussion of gender and religion, may not be immediately apparent. It is only in the comment section, in response to a baffled reader, that Nahida explains the connection:

Muslims aren't supposed to wear nail polish because during ablution the water doesn't cleanse the surface of your nails (nailpolish [sic] acts as a barrier) and the ablution is incomplete. But during our periods we're not required to pray, so a lot of us wear nailpolish then.

She is later called on by another commenter to further specify that this is not a belief that all Muslims hold (Zu hu ra, 16 June, 2011a). While Nahida does not ultimately follow through on her idea of posting pictures of her nail polish every month, she does continue to post nail polish pictures from time to time, each time with a clear reminder that this

indicates that she is currently on her period (see Figures 1 and 2). One month, having decided not to paint her nails, Nahida nonetheless still announces the beginning of her period, and posts an image not of her nails but of “panties that make [her] happy,” in order to ensure that her blog remains sufficiently “scandalous” (the fatal feminist, 24 March 2013).



Figure 1: A picture of Nahida's nails from a post entitled "nail polish as I bleeed (and gifts)" (the fatal feminist, 15 December 2011). Reproduced with permission of Nahida Nisa.

Throughout, it is clear that the function of the ongoing nail polish photo posts is not only to show off the bright and shiny colours she has chosen each month, but also to challenge the idea that menstruation is something to be kept quiet. In another blog about nail polish, Nahida writes, “Sometimes Muslim women are asked why they are wearing it (‘Do you want everyone to know you're menstruating?!’) as though menstruation is shameful, to which I say LOOK AT MY NAILS THEY ARE SO PRETTY!” (the fatal feminist, 22 February 2013). These posts explicitly make public something that many would argue is best kept private. Moreover, Nahida’s monthly cycle as reflected by her nail polish would ordinarily be implicitly kept private from her blog readers, by the simple fact that readers do not normally see images of her hands, nor does she ever post pictures of her nails when they are not painted.

The nail polish posts represent an adherence to a set of religious rules specific to



Figure 2: An image of Nahida's nails from a post entitled "I am menstruating, so nail polish obviously." (the fatal feminist, 25 June 2012). Reproduced with permission of Nahida Nisa.

bodies that menstruate and practices coded as feminine (not performing the ritual prayer while menstruating, and not wearing nail polish at times when it may be seen to prevent a valid ablution). At the same time, in a context where it could have been easily hidden – since her online readers don't have any access to Nahida's physical appearance except for what she chooses to show – Nahida's act of making visible her own cycle of

menstruation, in direct response to norms that would ordinarily keep this hidden, also

indicates a particular kind of challenge to certain structures of authority, and a mobilisation of the visual possibilities of the blog post toward that end. In telling and illustrating stories of menstruation, Nahida uses the blog to rethink rulings and languages related to gendered bodies within Islam.

Tafsir through blogging: Challenging the terms of debate

The Muslim women bloggers featured in this dissertation engage with a range of religious and cultural expectations (including those coming from the Western cultures in which they live) with regard to the stories they tell about their bodies, behaviour, and experiences. This arises with regard to a number of topics: family, women's leadership,

sexuality, clothing, abuse, relationships, and so on. In this chapter, I enter into more depth on the specific topic of menstruation, a topic discussed in depth on three of the blogs: The Fatal Feminist, Freedom From the Forbidden, and wood turtle. Nahida's story above illustrates the position that blogging can take as a point of intersection among discourses of gender, bodies, sexuality, ethics, purity, and religious law. Expanding from these and similar narratives, this chapter considers the role blogging plays in reaffirming or rejecting cultural and religious legal norms, and pointing to elements often left out of dominant discourses. In Chapter 2, using Sa'diyya Shaikh's (2007) work on "*tafsir* through praxis," I proposed a framework of "*tafsir* through blogging," as a lens through which to consider the work that is being done on Muslim feminist blogs. Such a framework allows us to examine the ways these women's blogging practices shape their religious understandings, and vice versa, as they make sense of texts and principles (both the explicitly "Islamic" and the apparently "non-Islamic"³⁶) in order to come up with understandings that they find to be correct and ethical. It further operates to open up conversations about what is missing from mainstream discussions on gender, bodies, and sexuality.

Eugenia Siapera (2009) writes that "Muslim blogs actively question the assignment or delegation of some issues as private, by showing the ways in which they have become politically relevant." She also notes that Muslim blogs can "invite dialogue that may take place elsewhere, or indeed may not take place at all" (p. 41). I am interested in two main threads that interweave together, echoing Siapera's comments about blogs as vehicles for

³⁶ Ali (2015) uses the term "non-Islamic" – which she distinguishes from "un-Islamic" – to denote thinking that comes from outside of narrowly-defined "Islamic" sources but can be productively incorporated into Muslim ethical discourses. Although she notes that this incorporation of non-Islamic ethics can raise a "defensive concern with religious authenticity" (p. 269), she also emphasises that Islamic scholars have historically looked to other non-Islamic sources, such as sciences and social sciences, to inform their ethical decisions, and thus her suggestion is not as radical as some may think.

showing supposedly private issues to be publicly important, and for providing a space for conversations that are not happening in other forums. On the one hand, I consider how the bloggers' public discussions of topics often designated as private (both within and outside of Muslim contexts) challenge many social expectations and, in so doing, provide alternate avenues for how these topics may be understood. On the other hand, I look at the ways that the bloggers' online writing responds to dominant religious interpretations of these issues, emphasising the factors they point to that are often absent from religious rulings, which for their part are focused primarily on texts and on legal permissibility. I argue that *tafsir* through blogging represents not only an intervention into religious debates about gender and sexuality, among other issues, but also a reconfiguration of the terms of the debate itself, questioning where and with whom these conversations can happen, and what information and ideas are missing. Using personal narratives, textual reinterpretations, and visual images to support their arguments, the bloggers maintain that many dominant opinions based on authoritative religious texts can serve (whether intentionally or not) to bolster discourses that shame and marginalise. At the same time, as blogger Shehnaz at Freedom from the Forbidden noted in my interview with her, detailed public discussions of one's body should not be seen as the only way to understand women as "liberated" (or as more liberated than others). In light of this, I note some of the ways that relying on narratives of bodies and experiences as the (only) path to feminist liberation can result in essentialism and erasure of certain experiences and perspectives, arguing that this tactic is not without its limitations.

Through the stories that they tell about their menstrual experiences – especially those linked explicitly to religious contexts – the bloggers in this study engage not only

with dominant religious interpretations with regard to menstruation, but also with the way these interpretations are sometimes presented, painting menstruating bodies³⁷ as impure or spiritually inferior. The act of using narratives and photographs to bring visibly menstruating bodies into the public space of a blog post disrupts assumptions about what can and should be publicly revealed – assumptions that stem from the bloggers' Muslim communities as well as the social norms of the larger and mainly non-Muslim Western societies in which they live. The topic of menstruation thus allows us to observe the multiple ways Muslim feminist writers engage with discourses surrounding gendered bodies, particularly in the context of personal religious narratives. Their blog posts respond not only to the dominant interpretations the writers have encountered but also to the impact that particular ways of discussing these interpretations has had on them and on others who menstruate.

Public diaries: Negotiating the place of blogs

Widespread public conversations about personal experiences of menstruation are often unwelcome in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. As Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith (2004) argue,

³⁷ In discussing menstruation here, I want to emphatically reject cisnormative assumptions – that is, assumptions that gender identity always corresponds to the sex assigned based on one's physical anatomy – that all women menstruate, or that all people who menstruate are women. For this reason, I use phrases such as "people who menstruate" (rather than the admittedly easier but less accurate "women") throughout much of this chapter. At the same time, as many of the bloggers also note, discourses around menstruation as dirty or impure have informed (and continue to inform) discourses about women (and, by extension, women's place in public spaces or in leadership roles). Especially in cases where the bloggers frame their arguments around "women's bodies," I use their language to echo their sentiment, and to make reference to societal discourses that do link menstruation to women's bodies, as reductive as that may be. Even in such cases, however, it should be understood that "menstruating bodies" and "women's bodies" are not synonymous categories.

The visibility of the body and flesh is subject to order, surveillance, and regulation, and yet the exposure of the body is fundamental to femininity and social order... Women (especially adolescent girls) are both encouraged to cover up, be modest, and conceal their flesh, and yet at the same time to reveal their bodies (through certain styles of clothing). (p. 106)

In a wide range of contexts, women and girls face pressures to manage not only what can be visibly read from their bodies but also what is known about them and their bodies – including the expectation that menstruation be kept private. Lauren Rosewarne (2012) further points out that “the frequent exclusion of menstruation from the public sphere as well as the stereotyped ways it often get portrayed makes analysis of this situation a salient feminist project” (p. 3). This is not to say that writing publicly about menstruation – either as a general concept or as a personal experience – should be a necessary component of feminist practice for every person. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the pressures sometimes placed on women to reveal or discuss intimate bodily experiences in the name of the feminist cause can serve to silence or alienate some women, and to police them and their bodies in new ways. Still, when public discussions of menstruation do arise, they can play a feminist role in challenging the ways bodies that menstruate are seen with fear and disgust, both within and outside Muslim contexts.

As discussed at length in Chapter 1, personal blogs straddle a complicated divide between the public and private, inherently complicating this division. On one hand, they are often structured and used in ways similar to private diaries, as regularly updated, open-ended chronicles of daily life (Rettberg, 2008; Serfaty, 2004). On the other hand, they are published in a public forum, accessible to anyone, and the writers are well aware that what

they write is not for their eyes only.³⁸ As Viviane Serfaty (2004) notes, this leads to blogs often serving a dual function of appearing as a transparent window onto the bloggers' lives while also masking the degree to which the content of the blogs (as with any autobiographical writing) is carefully scripted and managed, often with a clear audience in mind (p. 470). Keeping this particular configuration of private and public in mind allows us to consider the ways that blogs facilitate public conversations about topics understood as private, perhaps especially because the writing still takes place in a format that recalls a more intimate forum. The bloggers in this study use their blogs to challenge certain conceptions of what should be kept private, through simply talking about these topics, and through talking directly about the taboos and other factors that often put boundaries around public discussions of these topics.

If the comparison of blogs with private diaries sometimes feels like a stretch – after all, the differences between sitting in one's bedroom writing by hand in a notebook that can be locked and safely hidden and writing an article on a computer that ends with a click of the “publish” button may sometimes seem to eclipse whatever similarities exist – it is useful to revisit a conversation I had with Ify during my interview with her. Ify mentioned that she experiences blogging as very much a solitary activity, similar to the paper journals she used to keep as a child, and in fact she feels uncomfortable when she encounters people in person who tell her they have read her online writing. Even if she clearly knows that the writing is public, and she makes the deliberate decision to post it publicly, there seems nonetheless to be a kind of dissonance between her experience of the act of writing as a

³⁸ It is possible, through many blog platforms, to create blogs that are password-protected and therefore private (whether accessed only by the writer herself or shared with a selected audience), but the focus here is on personal blogs that are publicly published.

private and individual one (which of course it is), and the moment that she is made to confront the fact that people actually read her work. At least in Ify's case, then, there are similarities to be drawn between blogs and diaries not only in some of the stylistic features of a blog (as mentioned earlier, the open-ended nature, the regular updates, and the recording of day-to-day observations) but also in the very experience of writing, as something that can occur in a context that echoes the private, personal world of a diarist.

At the same time, it is perhaps misleading to think of blogs as being entirely "public" spaces; although they are accessible to anyone, they often operate, sometimes deliberately, in marginal spaces more reminiscent of the "withdrawal" function of a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990, p. 68) than of an engagement with wider public discourses. Anita Harris' (2003) work on what she refers to as "grrrlzines" (zines created by girls, in both paper and online formats) offers some insight into the ways certain forms of alternative media can be used in order to claim spaces that are not easily classified as private or public. Harris writes that girls are often subjects of a certain "cultural fascination" (p. 47) for whom public spaces can be full of normative pressures, regulations, and expectations geared towards particular hegemonic notions of "girl power" or of saving girls from the harms of social pressures. Their use of zines and other alternative media can thus be read in part as a deliberate rejection of the pressures and surveillance found in more mainstream media contexts, while still allowing for self-expression and even interaction with other young cultural producers. Harris describes this as a space where young women cultivate their own activism and self-expression without having to account for the risks of appropriation (p. 47).

As they encounter external stereotypes about being oppressed and/or violent, and internal community pressures to live up to particular norms, Muslim women are often subject to media attention but rarely framed as agents in their own lives. In this way, they may find themselves in a position similar to that which Harris (2003) describes in her work on girls, who are often simultaneously “too visible and not visible enough” (p. 47). Muslim women’s involvement with blogs (as well as zines, and other forms of media located outside the mainstream) offers some control of this visibility away from conventional understandings of public and private, allowing them to find instead an in-between space where they can continue to express themselves and connect with their audience without placing themselves directly in the public spotlight.³⁹ Being removed from the spotlight may also provide the bloggers more leeway to be creative in the interpretations that they write about, sheltering them from having to be held accountable to dominant public opinions or methodological precedents in the way that publishing writing in other spaces might entail.

Further, blogs also allow their authors a certain level of power over how readers engage within the space. On the one hand, this power remains somewhat limited; by being publicly accessible, blogs offer their writers little control over who is actually reading them, linking to them, talking about them, or even using their content. Shehnaz writes, for example, about being “afraid of the consequences of... letting strangers get a hold of [her] photos online,” based on previous experiences where photos she had shared on Facebook were later used without permission in three different instances as the background to Pashto songs posted on YouTube (Orbala, 19 March 2015). And yet, the blogs examined

³⁹ Of course, other Muslim women *do* engage in popular culture in ways that position them more in the spotlight. Some even appear to seek this out; see, for example, Hammer’s (2012) discussion of Asra Nomani. Others, such as Amina Wadud (2006), have written about the negative toll that being in the public eye has taken.

here also illustrate the ways some audience reactions, at least insofar as they are expressed in blog comments, can be managed by the blog writers. Blogging platforms generally allow for bloggers to moderate comments before they are posted, to edit or delete comments, or to close comments altogether on the blog as a whole or on individual posts. Both Ify and Nahida have comment policies, accessible through a link in the header that always appears at the top of their blogs, which make it explicit that comments are moderated and that certain kinds of comments will simply not be published. Ify's policy statement is relatively short, asking commenters to avoid insult and writing in all-caps; she ends with "Be Nice or Leave" (Okoye, n.d.b). Nahida's comment policy is more extensive, letting readers know that "Commenting is a privilege, not a right," and proceeding with much more detail, noting that various forms of "oppressive comments will not be accepted," and that she aims to avoid "useless and reckless derailing" (the fatal feminist, n.d.c).

As was discussed more extensively in Chapter 1, alternative media such as zines and blogs can also serve as a space to bring attention to and mobilise around issues often pushed out of public discussion (Schilt & Zobl, 2008; Kearney, 2006), forming counterpublic spaces of withdrawal and mobilisation (Fraser, 1990, 1995). As Kristin M. Sziarto and Helga Leitner (2010) point out, the designation of certain issues (and, by implication, not others) as being of "pubic concern" can be very political in that it can further marginalise oppressed groups. The role of a counterpublic in redefining and politicising issues previously considered as "private" can hold significant weight for these marginalised groups (p. 3). The ambiguous public and private positioning of personal blogs may serve a similar function, as they act both to provide an alternative space for

discussing issues that may be marginalised from the public sphere, and to bring the topics they discuss into conversation within larger public discourses.

In this way, the practice of blogging, like other forms of alternative media, can function as an act of “bearing witness,” which Yasmin Jiwani (2011) defines as “a tactical intervention used by marginalized groups to document the extent of violence directed against them” (p. 342).⁴⁰ Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) observes one impact of blogging over a long period of time, particularly when it involves issues not normally (or not previously) considered part of the public domain. In her observations of Iranian women’s blogs at a point where such blogs had been around in large numbers for at least seven years, Amir-Ebrahimi notes that the continuous presence of women’s narratives means that such stories “[become] a little bit more ordinary,” that their place in the public sphere is seen as less surprising or scandalous and thus less subject to judgement (p. 105). She also observes that the writers themselves become better equipped to respond to outside criticism. The suggestion, then, is that it is not only the fact of telling a particular story one time that has an impact (although this can be the case as well). The ongoing presence of such stories as instances of regularly bearing witness to injustice and recounting personal narratives in publicly-accessible online spaces may also have an effect of shifting perceptions of what is to be considered relevant and acceptable for public discussion.

⁴⁰ Jiwani’s words echo a much longer tradition of work on testimonial literature (and critiques thereof). See, for example, Yúdice, 1991; Marín, 1991; Sternbach, 1991; Gugelberger, 1996.

Negotiating bodies, the public, and the private in Muslim and Western discourses

Conceptions of public and private take on particular meanings within Muslim religious contexts. While they can often be tied to positive qualities of modesty and humility, and taken up as such by Muslim women themselves (Mahmood, 2005), notions of what is meant to be kept covered or hidden – whether physically or metaphorically – can also be used to police Muslim women's bodies. Concepts such as *'ayb* (shame, dishonour), *'awra* (that which must be covered), and *fitna* (temptation, disorder), despite being theoretically applicable to both men and women, are often invoked disproportionately in relation to women's bodies and women's presence in the public sphere. Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001), for example, points to the depiction of women by some religious leaders as “a walking, breathing bundle of *fitnah*” (p. 235), to illustrate the ways that portrayals of women as posing particular sexual temptations and threats serve to bar women from public life. These principles can lead to a kind of self-policing; among the South African Muslim women interviewed by Shaikh (2007), female chastity was central to defining a good Muslim woman, whereas “none of the women once mentioned the religious importance of male chastity” (p. 76). The double standard described here is reflected not only in religious texts or interpretations thereof, but also in how these texts get put into practice. The onus, in other words, is often placed on women to manage – and sometimes hide entirely – their bodies so as to avoid being seen as shameful, or being a source of temptation for others.

This pressure on women to manage public reactions to their bodies is, of course, not unique to Muslims or even to religious communities. To give only a few examples,

discussions of sexual assault in broader North American media often include descriptions of what the survivor was wearing or drinking (J. Lim & Fanghanel, 2013), and dress codes at schools or workplaces often involve implicit or explicit notions of covering one's body so as to avoid distractions (Sagan, 2015). With regard to menstruation specifically, it should be noted that it is not only in Muslim contexts where open discussions of menstruation can be (implicitly or explicitly) discouraged; one need only look at the advertisements for pads and tampons that appear on North American television, where blue ink is used to illustrate absorbency, to observe the ways that menstruation can be sanitised and covered up within mainstream Western culture. A series of Tampax television commercials in 2007, for example, contained the slogan "Keep your period private with Tampax." As Rosewarne (2012) explains, the advertisements, which mocked the idea of publicly announcing that one is menstruating, based their humour on the assumption that nobody should know when a woman is on her period, and that no woman would want anyone to know that she was menstruating (p. 8). Carly Stasko (2008) writes that, as a young woman, she came to believe from similar ads that "menstruation was dirty, unclean, and smelly," and that no one should know when she was on her period; these messages, she writes, "filled [her] with shame, insecurity, and fear" (p. 202).

More recently, a photograph by artist Rupri Kaur was removed from Instagram in 2015 because its depiction of menstrual blood in everyday contexts was deemed to be in violation of Instagram's community guidelines; the picture was later reinstated after a widespread public outcry (Zamon, 2015). In July 2015, London marathon runner Kiran Gandhi made the news after she ran the marathon while menstruating and deciding not to wear a pad or tampon for logistical reasons; she was pictured in news articles finishing the

marathon with menstrual blood clearly visible on her shorts (Gandhi, 2015). While both these women did receive widespread support on social media and elsewhere, the panic and discomfort that also arose in response to the ways that they made visible their experiences of menstruation demonstrate the existence of significant social pressures to keep menstruation out of the public eye. Likewise, in the case of Muslim women bloggers living in the West, the notion of menstruation being a taboo topic, whose place in public discussions is at best uncertain, is not a message coming uniquely from religious sources. In other words, it is not only religious discourses that are being challenged through the blog posts.

On the flip side, it should also be acknowledged that open discussions about, and acknowledgements of, menstruation are not uncommon in Muslim spaces. As will be explained later in this chapter (see pp. 178-179), the general consensus among legal rulings identifying the conditions necessary for ablution (itself a necessary condition for prayer) is that menstruation prevents a valid ablution and thus that people on their menses are excused from the ritual prayer. Menstruating individuals are also excused from fasting during Ramadan (Lizzio, 2013). It then becomes rather ordinary to observe certain people not participating in communal prayer, or not fasting, and it is generally understood that phrases such as “I’m not praying” are code for being on one’s period. In other words, menstruation, and even the act of communicating to others that one is menstruating, is far from being an entirely taboo or hidden topic within Muslim communities. Zainab Bint Yunus, who writes at the blog *The Salafi Feminist* (from a much more self-proclaimed “orthodox” perspective than the others in this study), describes a story taken from a canonical *hadith* collection about the Prophet Muhammad, where he noticed that a girl

whose first period had started while traveling, and in a matter-of-fact way, instructed her on how to clean it up, and later gifted her with a necklace. The suggestion, as the blogger argues, is that even fourteen centuries ago, menstruation was something that could be acknowledged frankly and talked about without shame by none other than the Prophet himself, and that later taboos that arose need not be seen as intrinsic to Islam (Bint Yunus, 14 January 2014). (Nahida retells the same story in a guest post on wood turtle [30 May 2012].) In another post, Bint Yunus talks about a woman who came to the Prophet to ask him questions about female wet dreams, arguing that there is substantial Islamic precedent for speaking openly and in detail about women's bodily functions (25 March 2015). In other words, frank discussions about menstruation and sexuality are neither a recent development, nor unique to those located closer to the "progressive" side of the religious spectrum.

The religious precedents for openness about menstruation are mentioned not in order to romanticise Islamic religious teachings when it comes to menstruation or to suggest that they are universally pro-woman or open to discussing menstruation (or necessarily more so than mainstream Western culture) on this issue. In fact, Bint Yunus uses the second anecdote above as part of an argument against what she views as "double standards" in practice, including pressures on women in many Muslim communities to "[deny] their sexuality" (25 March 2015). Nonetheless, when establishing the context in which Nahida and others challenge certain taboos around menstruation, my point is that it remains relevant to acknowledge that these taboos are not unique to Muslims, and nor are they inherent to or pervasive within every facet of Muslim communities and religious discourses.

Indeed, there are many people, even ones who adopt religiously what some might refer to as conservative perspectives, who would likely not see the act of talking publicly about menstruation or similar topics as particularly revolutionary. It should be noted, in other words, that not all of these (re)interpretations are “new,” nor are they seen as such by the bloggers themselves. Frank discussions about women’s bodies and the religious rulings that govern them have a long history in Islamic jurisprudence, even in public contexts. Fatima Mernissi (1991) argues that the Prophet Muhammad worked to publicly challenge and condemn beliefs from pre-Islamic Arabian culture that “regarded sexuality, and the menstruating woman in particular, as a source of pollution, as a pole of negative forces” (p. 73). In a contemporary context, too, openness about one’s personal life is not limited to women understood to be “progressive” or “feminist.” Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) notes that, despite public assumptions that women bloggers in Iran are largely “modern, and secular,” there is a large contingent of young women bloggers who are religious students and who also write openly about their ideas and personal experiences (p. 100). Although Amir-Ebrahimi characterises this as an “apparent contradiction,” this contradiction is perhaps best located in the eye of the beholder, as religiosity is not necessarily synonymous with conservatism, and neither of these concepts carries a necessary connection to passivity or silence (as may have been implied in the assumption to which Amir-Ebrahimi refers that female bloggers are largely secular). The bloggers thus do not always see themselves as challenging “religious” principles per se; in many cases, they instead use religious sources to back up their challenges to what they see as norms originating in culture or patriarchy.

Reincorporating what is left out of legal discourses

Along with challenging what it means to designate certain topics as “private” and thus inappropriate for public discussion, the blogs cited in this and the following chapter also work to shift the ways in which the content of such discussions is understood. In Chapter 2, I provided a very brief overview of the structure of Islamic legal reasoning (*fiqh*), which uses religious texts (primarily the *Qur’an* and the *hadith* literature, as well as other works of legal thought) in order to evaluate which actions are permitted (*halal*) or forbidden (*haram*), and to determine the specific requirements for particular acts of worship (such as the ritual prayer or the pilgrimage). I also discussed the contention of Shahab Ahmed (2016), Kecia Ali (2015), and others that legal questions tend to overdetermine whether or not something is considered “Islamic” in a contemporary context, often to the exclusion (or at least the marginalisation) of ethical, philosophical, or other discourses.

The focus on law that predominates in many contemporary Islamic contexts has a few different implications for the bloggers and their practice of *tafsir* through blogging. Perhaps most obviously, it leads the writers to discuss particular rulings, and to comment on whether or not they agree. Their engagement with the law, however, does not stop at the level of the ruling. In many cases, the bloggers speak not necessarily to the content of the law itself but to the language in which it is expressed or to other considerations often pushed aside in favour of the question of legal permissibility. In doing so, these bloggers call attention to the impact of the law beyond simply a designation of something as *halal* or *haram*. Thus, as we will see in more detail later in this chapter, Nahida’s nail polish posts simultaneously demonstrate a conformity with many rather mainstream Sunni

interpretations of Islamic law, while at the same time challenging the linguistic slippage through which legal discussions around purity have resulted in menstruating bodies themselves being seen as contaminated (or contaminating). Similarly, Kirstin does not explicitly reject the legal prohibition from prayer while menstruating, but challenges the resulting exclusion that many people face during that time.

Menstruation (the subject of this chapter) and queer issues (the subject of Chapter 4) both represent areas that have seen significant jurisprudential discussion around actions that may be required or forbidden (with varying degrees of severity). Both topics elicit comments from readers arguing that the legal rulings on the issue are clear, providing citations from the Qur'an or *hadiths* to prove their point, and implicitly or explicitly asking why the bloggers are bothering to discuss their struggles with the issue in so much detail when the appropriate religious understanding is so evident. And yet it also seems evident that, for the women blogging about these topics, the presentation of "clear" rulings is insufficient – either because they disagree with the rulings or with their supposed clarity, or because, as clear as the rulings may be, the answers they provide regarding legal permissibility fail to address other questions the bloggers might have about representation and exclusion. The bloggers' writing on their encounters with some of these rulings and principles serve as a basis for (re)interpretations based on moments when these rulings are unable to respond to the full context in which they are being applied, or where, in other words, the questions at hand are not simply legal ones. This will be seen later in this chapter, for example, where rulings around menstruation do not account for the effective stigmatisation of menstruating bodies that discourses of purity sometimes entail, or in Chapter 4, where legal opinions on specific sexual acts do little to encompass the diversity

of attraction, love, and relationships in the lives of queer Muslims. Along with challenging boundaries around what can (or should) be discussed publicly, *tafsir* through blogging becomes a way of pointing to elements that are not often considered within dominant religious interpretations and juridical rulings – and, at times, prioritising personal narratives or appeals to broader values over textual readings as the bloggers elaborate their understandings of faith, ethics, gender, and sexuality.

Menstruation in context: Discourses of privacy and impurity

It is useful here to spend some time examining how menstruation is treated within Islamic jurisprudence, in order to better understand the specific frameworks to which the bloggers are responding. As Celene Ayat Lizzio (2013) explains, while there are some divergences on certain issues (such as whether a menstruating person can touch a Qur'an or enter a mosque) depending on sect and school of thought, "as a normative position across Muslim schools of legal thought, the menstruating female is excluded from the foundational rights (*arkan*) of ritual prayer (*salat*), fasting (*sawm*), and the central pilgrimage rite of circumambulation (*tawaf*)" (p. 170). In most cases, this exclusion of menstruating bodies from particular rituals is linked to the need for a state of purity achieved through ablution as a precondition to performing these rituals. The flow of menses is understood to invalidate the state of ablution although, at least in theory, it is the menstrual blood and not the menstruating individual that is seen as ritually impure (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013, p. 123). Still, the fact that menstruation disrupts a person's ability to perform the ritual prayer has led to women being seen as inferior to men in religious practice (Lizzio, 2013, p. 174), as men continue to overwhelmingly dominate

“establishment Islam” and claim authority to interpret and make pronouncements regarding women’s bodies (p. 178). These legal rulings on menstruation are related to notions of ritual purity and sexual availability; issues of legal permissibility do not factor into questions about whether menstruation should be discussed publicly. Still, as is reflected in the opening anecdote about Nahida’s friend’s mother’s reaction to her nail polish, the idea of “announcing” that one is menstruating may still be considered improper by some.

Storytelling and raising tensions

In writing about these issues, the bloggers challenge ideas about what menstruating bodies can do, where they ought to be, and how explicitly they can be acknowledged as such. Other than Nahida, to whom I will return in a moment, Kirstin is the most explicit of the four bloggers with regard to her own narratives of menstruation. For her, menstruation constitutes one of many body-related topics that she discusses openly on her blog. When I interviewed her, she attributed part of her comfort in writing about her body to her experience of having given birth:

Giving birth in nothing but like a sheet and a hijab, naked everywhere else, just totally like broke down whatever body restraints – not restraints, just taboos around body that I have ever had. Totally. So before I wouldn’t necessarily talk about that. I gave birth in a room full of men and women, naked in front of all these people, and suddenly I’m like, well, it doesn’t really matter if I say these things in public. So that – that also had an effect.

Kirstin also explained that her practice of mommy blogging was part of what led her to talk so openly about her body online; it was a space where discussing things like the ins and outs of breastfeeding was so commonplace that she became used to talking very freely about her breasts. She writes in one post about struggling to get Eryn to latch properly as an infant, and about overcoming self-consciousness about breastfeeding in public (wood turtle, 8 June 2010). Another early post is titled “stop it, you suck,” a reference to what Kirstin had said to her infant teething daughter who was repeatedly biting her breast while nursing that evening (28 June 2010). In another piece, Kirstin writes that returning to work full-time after maternity leave meant that Eryn, by then a toddler, went from ambivalence to enthusiasm about nursing; as Kirstin describes it, “My baby dances for my boobs” (12 February 2011). The language is often frank, familiar and informal, communicating a level of comfort and nonchalance that is also reflected in the way she writes about other bodily functions. In another post, she writes about difficulty with “bowel function” and controlling gas after Eryn’s birth, which invalidates the ablution required as part of establishing ritual purity for prayer (9 August 2010). For Kirstin, these discussions about motherhood, birth, and breastfeeding created a context where talking about menstruation felt entirely unremarkable.

Kirstin mentions menstruation a few times on wood turtle, and the post where she discusses the topic in the most detail, written in January 2011, is entitled “only women bleed: menstruation in Islam” (15 January 2011). As of October 2015, it received 189 comments and trackbacks, by far the highest number of any of her posts, and is the most read post on her blog. She begins the post with a description of the first time she got her

period after the birth of her older daughter, following a year and a half without menstruation because of pregnancy and breastfeeding. She describes waking up with her daughter on what felt like a normal morning, then feeling shocked upon going to the bathroom and noticing that her period has begun, and realising that this explained some physical symptoms – headaches and sensitivity in her breasts while nursing her daughter – that she had been experiencing. When I spoke to her about this post in an interview, she said,

I guess the idea behind the post is in the very first paragraph, where I'm like, oh wow, my period is back now, and oh, I guess I can stop praying? Why? Why do I have to stop praying, I've been praying nonstop for two years, what is it – and then that's when I realised – well, why do we have to stop?

This questioning leads her to reflect on what it means to take a “break” from prayer, after not having done this for so long, and to look more broadly at discussions about Qur'an, *hadith*, and jurisprudence, as they relate to menstruation and prayer.

Much of Kirstin's post focuses on challenging the ways this break from prayer during menstruation is conceptualised in discussions she regularly encounters. If the “break” from prayer during menstruation is seen as a mercy in response to the potential difficulties of praying while dealing with cramps and bleeding, she asks, then what makes menstruation different from situations of illness, where one might still be required to pray, even if the physical movements have to be modified? If it is a question of (menstrual) blood invalidating ritual purity, then how do we understand stories from Islamic history of companions of the Prophet praying with nosebleeds and battle wounds, or, for that matter, the exceptions made for people with abnormally long menstrual flows, who are instructed

to start praying again after a certain number of days have passed (see Lizzio, 2013)?

Kirstin also considers the implications of some of these ideas for how women and women's bodies are positioned within Muslim communities, often seen as impure or dirty, and denied access to certain spaces – and thus to particular forms of learning and worship – for a substantial proportion of their lives.

Kirstin notes the implicit ways these principles get challenged: the women who seem to coincidentally get their periods only just after Eid prayer ends, or a woman she knows who would lie about her period in order to continue her Islamic calligraphy classes. While she is vague about her own position on the issue, she writes towards the end of the post that:

If the injunction not to pray is indeed formed upon the common practice as taught by the Prophet, then it is unfair to argue otherwise. Women's bodies are routinely portrayed negatively in the materials aimed at educating us on what we can and cannot do. Even if the topic is dealt with respectfully and only notes the physical differences between men and women, relying on the traditional arguments still sets up unhealthy attitudes for women about their bodies.

In a note at the end where she explains the sources she uses for Qur'anic translations, *hadiths*, and legal rulings in the post, she again writes, *"I am not arguing against the injunction, but how it is presented in popular literature."* In other words, she does not necessarily reject the mainstream legal position on menstruation, although she does not seem to argue in favour of it either, and her use of the conditional at the beginning of the long quote above suggests that she is not fully convinced of the Prophetic source of this injunction. She does, however, argue that regardless of the legal position one takes on

some of these questions, there is more at stake than a reading of classical texts regarding the context in which one's prayers may or may not be valid. In other words, even if we accept the legal conclusions about when people can and cannot pray, we are left with questions about the implications of these conclusions for how people who menstruate come to think about their bodies more broadly.

Kirstin does not negate the relevance of the question of legal correctness, but adds to it that even the approaches understood to be legally sound often carry with them notions of certain bodies as inferior or dirty, notions that can have a real spiritual impact. Moreover, her comments in the same post about the value of prayer also highlight why she sees the argument about menstruation being a time for a "break" from being required to pray as unconvincing. Kirstin writes that "prayer helps define what it means to be Muslim," and that "It binds us together as a global community, provides solace, and expresses love for the divine." In other words, being told she cannot pray while on her period is, for her, not an instance of being "let off the hook" from a burdensome obligation, but rather one of being barred from an act of worship that is deeply meaningful to her, one in which she actively wants to partake. There is a tension here between a religious practice that she believes to be legally correct and its ensuing detrimental spiritual impact.

Kirstin's writing on this issue leaves us with more questions than answers. What exactly do we do with this ambivalence? For religious practitioners for whom following the law is important, what happens when that same legal system seems to divide them from practices and communities that hold meaning for them? These questions point to an ongoing tension that the blog post leaves very explicitly unresolved. Kirstin's personal blog, in this case, is a space where she can think out loud and write openly about doubts

and uncertainties, creating a public forum for simply not knowing. As she weaves personal narratives with legal understandings, Kirstin raises possibilities for questioning what it looks like for conversations around menstruation to incorporate stories of menstruating bodies, and for the evaluations of legal permissibility to also include attention to the side effects of excluding practitioners from prayer.

Challenging discourses of contamination

At The Fatal Feminist blog, the nail polish posts were not the first time that Nahida wrote about menstruation. The topic first comes up on her blog about three months before the nail polish post (and about two months after Kirstin's menstruation post), in a post titled "menstruation and prayer," where Nahida writes about being told she should not be in a mosque while menstruating (22 March 2011). This post begins neither with the story about being in the mosque, nor with a theoretical examination of principles related to menstruation and prayer, although she does eventually address both of these topics. Instead, similar to wood turtle's post, Nahida's begins with a detailed, even somewhat graphic, description of the beginning of her last period: waking up with a headache at 2:30am, noticing "thin pools of blood" in the toilet, finding a pad, deciding to forgo painkillers for the moment, and then regretting that decision as she lies with "intense pain" in her abdomen and her legs.

The description of the mosque experience comes later, but this introduction is significant. Through it, Nahida establishes that she is not afraid or embarrassed to talk about menstruation, and that, as in Kirstin's post, the relationship of menstruating bodies to religious discourses does not stop at the question of when it is legally permissible to

pray. This sets the stage for Nahida to use her experience as a basis for the way that she narrates some of the other observations she makes later in the post. Similarly, this act of bringing her menstruating body into the virtual space of the blog through narrative parallels the story Nahida tells about her later act of bringing her menstruating body into the physical space of the mosque, suggesting, in both cases, that despite taboos around both menstruation and discussions thereof, Nahida is unwilling either to remove her body from the space or to hide the fact that she is menstruating.

After finally getting up and taking painkillers, Nahida heads to the mosque, and relates the following exchange:

In the prayer area, I sit while other women perform their prayers. One of them approaches me.

“Why aren’t you praying?”

“Menstruating,” I said simply.

“Then you can’t sit here.”

“Um. Why not?” I asked to be polite. In my head the reply was something like,

No, actually, I’m pretty sure I can.

“You’re contaminated.” I’m not kidding. She actually said this. “There are couches in the hall.”

“I’m pretty sure menstruating isn’t contagious.” I forced a laugh.

“You’ll ruin everyone else’s prayers.”

“Really? Says who?”

Nahida goes on to talk about how the woman, whom she firmly believes to be incorrect, does not even seem to know where her point about ruining others' prayers came from.⁴¹ She does not challenge the ruling that women do not have to pray on their periods, but echoes Kirstin in expressing her exasperation at the ways that menstruating bodies come to be seen as dirty and contaminated. While Kirstin's post takes a fairly measured tone (Kirstin explained to me that she did not want to offend anyone, but wanted to present the information and let her readers draw their own conclusions), Nahida's language on the subject is more forceful. She writes, "But don't give me this bullshit about contamination. Or tell me the reason I don't have to pray is because I'm 'incapable' of it. Or that I just need a 'break.' I will kick your patronizing ass" (22 March 2011).

A later post, written partly as a clarification after she introduced the nail polish series, elaborates on Nahida's understandings of Qur'anic- and *hadith*-based rulings around menstruation, and makes a strong argument that this notion of menstruation as a state of contamination has no basis in religious texts. She writes with some frustration that her mother had been taught as a young woman "that once the menses were over she needed to clean everything she ever touched" (16 June 2011b). Nahida contrasts this with a *hadith* specifying that if anyone gets menstrual blood on their clothing, all they need to do is wash the blood out with water, and then the clothing is once more appropriate for prayer. Commenting on the quoted *hadith*, she writes,

Only the part that has blood, people! You don't need to run around lighting things on fire because you touched them. And even *this* doesn't imply that the

⁴¹ There is a difference of legal opinion regarding whether people who are menstruating can go into mosques (Lizzio, 2013, pp. 174-175), although the legal explanations do not usually frame menstruating bodies as having the capacity to affect the validity of others' prayers.

blood is spiritual contamination—unless you want to force a patriarchal interpretation on it. Objectively all it says is that you should clean off the blood from your clothes, which—if you ask me—is freakin common sense. Yes, if your clothes are stained, do clean them by all means. (16 June 2011b)

The sarcastic and confrontational language, while not entirely out of place on Nahida's blog, again suggests a level of indignation at the ways that, in her view, practical advice regarding menses comes to position menstruating bodies as a "contamination" that must be prevented from entering physical and discursive religious spaces.

In fact, Nahida identifies this point about contamination as what drives her to start posting the nail polish pictures: what she takes issue with is not simply the idea that menstruating bodies should be hidden, but rather the discourses around the suggestion as to *why* such bodies should be hidden. Posting the nail polish pictures is both an act to make menstruation visible and a rejection of the idea that there is something gross or shameful about her body while it is in that state. The nail polish images then function as a way for Nahida to tell a different story about her body from the stories, language, and rulings that have circulated around her. Her argument is both a legal one, positing a particular reading of texts in order to comment on the rituals that can be performed while menstruating, and a response to social discourses, in which she responds to the positioning of menstruating bodies as dirty and dangerous. In this way, *tafsir* through blogging can be a process not only of engaging with interpretations as they exist through established fields or methodologies (such as legal interpretations or scriptural exegesis), but also to point out harmful assumptions and stereotypes that have circulated alongside these interpretations.

Reader comments on menstruation

Responses to Nahida's posts about nail polish are largely positive and come from both Muslims and non-Muslims. One writes that she would ordinarily "roll [her] eyes" at seeing pictures of nail polish on a feminist site, seeing it as "irrelevant to social justice," but that Nahida's post demonstrates that "almost any act can be an act of rebellion under the right circumstances, the kind of subtle signs of defiance and freedom that are invisible to those outside of specific communities" (Flint, 18 July 2011). When I interviewed Nahida, she told me about the nail polish posts that "those are the only posts that no man has ever commented on, because they're not comfortable talking about menstruation. But it's also the only type of post that no woman has ever criticised." A glance at the comments on her posts suggests this may be true, taking into account that it is impossible to verify gender through online comments. Although a few commenters do offer *hadiths* they see as contradicting Nahida's arguments or interpretations on menstruation in Islam in a more general post that she writes as an overview of the issue (lumosnox44, 20 July 2011; Irena, 9 January 2012), none express objections to any of her posts about nail polish, and none of the comments on any menstruation-related posts seem to be left by men. In some ways, this may simply reflect Nahida's usual reader base; it is of course also impossible to verify the reasons that no men have commented on these posts, and it may well be a coincidence. Still, one might wonder to what degree the nail polish discussions, in their explicitness – along with the topic of menstruation itself – may scare some people off from participating, as Nahida suspects.

The demographics of Nahida's comment section on menstruation-related posts are in sharp contrast with Kirstin's post on menstruation, where the commenters, although

mostly female, also include a handful of men. Most of the male-identified commenters on Kirstin's post (especially two commenters, who go by the names Jafar and Omair, and who both comment repeatedly) seem to be focused on arguing for particular understandings of religious texts related to menstruation, ablution, and ritual purity. One commenter, who posts as "WM" and who is presumably male (based on a reference to women as "they"), simply quotes a *hadith* along with Kirstin's observation that "it is unfair to argue" against something that can be established as a command from the Prophet Muhammad, suggesting that, according to him, one does not pray on one's period, and the case is therefore closed (WM, 15 January 2011). Other commenters, both male and female, posit that the rulings are "clear" (Shereen, 26 December 2011) and that Kirstin simply needs to "look closely" to "see the clarity [sic] of His [God's] fairness" (NADIA, 28 December 2011). Some women even write favourably about the kinds of rulings that Kirstin describes, such as one who explains that she "would never trade in [her] prayer break for the cycle-less life of a man" (Rebekah, 5 December 2011). Another criticises the post more vehemently, arguing that it is "not according to islamic [sic] morals," that the images Kirstin includes are "*haram*," and that the narrative that begins the post "sounds like an obscene story" (Patricia Antonia, 22 September 2014). As can be seen from the dates on the comments, the conversation continued for long after the post was originally published.

On the other side are readers who appear deeply appreciative of the post. The overwhelming majority of these comments come from Muslim women who share Kirstin's discomfort; a handful of non-Muslim women chime in as well to say that Kirstin's posts resonates with their own experiences in their respective Christian or Hindu religious communities. Some write that they have decided to discard *hadiths* entirely (Khadija

Hasan, 20 December 2011), or that they do pray while on their periods despite the existing rulings (Khadeeja, 11 February 2011). Others propose alternate readings of the exemption from prayer while menstruating: that menstruation itself is a state of “deep prayer” (Shabana, 16 January 2011) or that women are “innately closer to God” already (WriterlyMuslimah, 16 July 2011). The comment section thus serves as a continuation of the discussion, where readers respond based on their own experiences and relationships to the topic, reflecting different kinds of investment in the topic and different ways of engaging with it in their own religious practices.

Engaging with law and practice

Although Nahida and Kirstin both write critically about discourses of menstruation as dirty and menstruating bodies as lesser in religious terms, it would be simplistic and inaccurate to understand their writing only in opposition to the dominant perspectives that they cite. Most of Kirstin’s post challenges the conventional arguments used to support the conclusion that people should not pray while on their periods; however, she does not reject the conclusion directly. Nor, for that matter, does she provide many details about her own approach within her personal practice related to prayer and menstruation. Commenter Shabana picks up on this, writing that she “was so waiting for a punchline” or for Kirstin to identify “which one is the explanation” among the different perspectives that she considers (16 January 2011). Instead, even after questioning many of the reasons given for forbidding ritual prayer during menstruation, Kirstin notes almost in passing that it would be “unfair” to reject a Prophetic instruction not to pray while menstruating (wood turtle, 15 January 2011). In posting her pictures of nail polish, Nahida also implicitly accepts and

legitimises the principles both that menstruation exempts people from prayer and that nail polish invalidates ritual ablution. She does clarify, however, that while she believes that ritual prayer is not obligatory during menstruation, she disagrees with the idea that it is thus *forbidden*; she also acknowledges that some people do pray while on their periods (the fatal feminist, 16 June 2011a).

The fact that neither Nahida nor Kirstin spends much time explaining their personal practices in relation to the legal rulings about whether one can pray while menstruating may seem surprising, given that the reason that the issue even exists is seemingly because of legal principles related to ritual purity. Even so, it seems that these conversations, begun around specific legal issues, point to principles that come to take greater relevance for both women's lives. As Kirstin maintains, even if we decide not to "argue otherwise" against the Prophet's instruction not to pray while on one's period, we are still left with discourses that portray women's bodies as dirty and physically weak (15 January 2011). Further, in talking about discourses of "contamination," Nahida reminds us of the ways these discourses come to shape how women are seen within their communities (16 June 2011a). In both cases, the bloggers publicly share narratives of their personal encounters with the ways that discussions around menstruation result in a devaluing and rejection of their bodies, and of other bodies that menstruate. This act of sharing their own encounters leaves open some of the relevant legal questions while calling attention to the effects of these discussions on bodies that menstruate that go beyond the regulation of ritual practice.

Interestingly, a few years later, Kirstin also wrote about nail polish, making reference to Nahida's posts, and sharing a picture of her own nails (wood turtle, 9 December 2013; see Figure 3). The post also talks about starting a monthly nail polish series of her own, although she never followed up with this idea. And yet in the interview with me, which took place shortly after that piece was published, Kirstin was clear that although she planned to



Figure 3: A photo of Kirstin's nails, from a post entitled "monday moments" (wood turtle, 9 December 2013). Reproduced with permission of Kirstin Dane.

post nail polish pictures every month, she was not in fact going to limit painting her nails to the times when she was menstruating, because she "[doesn't] give a damn." She explained to me, however, that she was deliberately vague about this on the blog, so as not to lose certain readers who she thought might judge her nail polish as "*haram*" (forbidden). Having people know that she had her period was seen as less likely to "rock the boat" than a perhaps less strict approach to definitions of ritual purity. The story that Kirstin tells to her readers about her body, while following in the footsteps of Nahida's "in-your-face" approach to talking about menstruation, is nonetheless carefully planned so that other stories about her embodied practices (such as all the other times of the month when she might paint her nails) remain hidden. Again, in this case, certain dominant ideas (such as the need to avoid wearing nail polish in order to make ablution for prayer when not

menstruating) are upheld, while others (the notion that it is better not to speak too openly about one's period) are subverted.

It is only in a comment in a post published much later on her own blog (the relevance of the later timing is discussed below) that Shehnaz talks explicitly about her own practices related to menstruation and prayer, taking a position that goes against dominant legal understandings much more overtly than either Nahida or Kirstin (Orbala, 28 March 2015). In line with the other two bloggers, Shehnaz agrees that Muslims are exempt from the obligation of ritual prayer while menstruating, agreeing with Nahida that this does not mean that such a practice would be forbidden. However, in contrast to the other two bloggers' implicit acceptance of the notion of not praying while on one's period, Shehnaz writes that "since I don't believe that I'm not *allowed* to pray or fast during my period, or that menstruation invalidates my prayers or fasts, I pray especially while I'm on my period; this is when I take my prayers most seriously." Although Shehnaz does not directly explain why it is that she "[takes her] prayers most seriously" while menstruating, the suggestion from what follows – where she notes that "These are men telling me when my prayers are accepted by God and when they're not" – is that her prayers take on additional meaning for her precisely in the moment when she is challenging the conventional ruling that the prayers have no legal weight at all (28 March 2015). Here, she responds to what "men" tell her about her body by claiming to subvert their authority entirely, not simply refusing to abstain from prayer during the times she is told that her prayer is not valid, but instead infusing that prayer with added importance that derives its value from somewhere other than legal validity or obligation. Although Shehnaz discusses

her own menstrual experiences and practices much less than Kirstin or Nahida, her comment here reflects a similar challenge to dominant discourses around menstruation.

Scandal and/as sexual liberation? Taking a step back

In one post about having her period, Nahida does not show her nails; she explains that she will be traveling and prefers to keep her nails “natural.” Instead, she posts a picture of foliage-patterned underwear with leopard-print lace, describing these as “panties that make me happy, because *the fatal feminist* is apparently not scandalous enough” (the fatal feminist, 24 March 2013). This concern about being sufficiently scandalous can be read as undermining her assertions elsewhere that images of bras or discussions about periods should be simply regarded as everyday matters, rather than as taboo or titillating topics. After all, if (as Nahida argues elsewhere) a picture of a lacy bra should be seen as a normal piece of clothing that many people wear (see the comment section in the fatal feminist, 6 February 2011), why should a pair of underwear have any “scandalous” connotations at all, leaf prints and leopard spots notwithstanding? This self-conscious performance of scandalousness hints at a similar performance happening in some of her other posts as well – that, while there is still some attempt to normalise discussions about topics like menstruation, there is also a satisfaction taken in the ways that the posts *do* scandalise and shock.

Nahida’s self-conscious performance of a kind of openness about her body (and, to some degree, sexuality) also raises questions about women who decide not to express their own sexuality publicly in the same way. While the acknowledgement of one woman’s openness certainly does not necessarily entail a corresponding criticism of women who are

less open on similar topics, there may be a risk of it being taken that way, as if publicly discussing or acknowledging sexuality, bodies, and other supposedly taboo topics is always a sign of greater power or liberation. After all, the liberty to make the choice to talk about one's body in a particular way presumably has as its corollary the option to decide not to do so. There is a danger, in that sense, of suggesting that certain bloggers' practices of writing in ways that explicitly expose or challenge these divisions of public and private are the only ways of demonstrating a kind of agency in self-representation. As Michele L. Hammers (2006) argues, power is present not only in discourses that appear overtly oppressive, but also in those that claim to define what freedom means and looks like (p. 222). Following Foucault, she notes that "saying yes to sex (or in this case, the female body) is not the same as saying no to power" (p. 234).

When it comes to discussions of Muslim women, this danger has echoes in imperialist rhetoric about the need to "save" Muslim women through particular forms of sexual liberation – a rhetoric visible both in historical examples of forced unveiling under colonial powers (Yeğenoğlu, 1998) and in more recent examples of topless Femen activists protesting outside mosques across Europe (Eileraas, 2014, p. 49). Jason Lim and Alexandra Fanghanel (2013) point out that "If ideas of sexual freedom and rights can resonate with colonialist discourses about 'liberating' Muslim women from patriarchal oppression, then it may be that... the very appeal to sexual emancipation rests upon a Eurocentric vision of agency" (p. 208). Even women in Muslim contexts whose work to challenge sexual norms may be read as brave or revolutionary in their context risk being co-opted by groups like Femen or larger discourses of power (Eileraas, 2014, p. 47). In other words, seeing sexual openness or active challenging of norms around bodies and sexuality as inherently and

uniquely liberating not only imposes new norms about how individuals should behave sexually but also feeds into colonial projects with regard to Muslim women. The openness with which Nahida and Kirstin talk about their periods should thus also be read in a context that does not accept this openness as the only way of claiming agency over one's body and the discourses that shape it.

This issue has particular relevance to Shehnaz's blog. Shehnaz had previously taken issue with the idea that women's liberation always takes the same form, or that public performances of bodily agency are always empowering for all women, an idea that leaves out many women for whom such actions feel uncomfortable for cultural, personal, or other reasons (see Orbala, 27 February 2013). She deals with the topic at most length in a post that she wrote entitled "The Privilege of Sexy Talk" (19 March 2015), which provides an unusually direct response to the issues raised earlier in this chapter. The post begins as a reaction to a paper I presented at the 2014 conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), in which I looked at Nahida's and Kirstin's writing on the topic of menstruation, based on an early draft of this chapter. Shehnaz writes that the presentation made her feel inspired "to write something sexually provocative" (she refers to this kind of writing throughout the post as "sexy talk"), but that, as in similar past situations, she refrained, thinking about sensibilities (both her own and those of her readers) linked to her Pashtun Muslim upbringing. While she explains that she understands and rejects the basis for "modesty ideals" that define a "good girl," she also describes a lingering "feeling of discomfort" when it comes to certain topics, such as sex, sexuality, periods, and relationships.

Shehnaz's reflections on the topic highlight a complicated tension: one that, she argues, cannot be dismissed by simply deciding to write on whatever topic she chooses, however controversial. As she explains, in response to my AAR conference presentation,

I realized what a privilege it actually must be for a woman, Muslim no less, to be able to talk about her body and something considered so intimate and private as menstruation without feeling guilty and without fearing any consequences. It's a privilege I am denying myself currently but one that I want to enjoy eventually.

And, no, it's not simple like: "You are freeeee! Write on whatever you want!" Shut up, please. (Orbala, 19 March 2015)

Elaborating on her request that detractors "shut up," Shehnaz writes that her response to questions about why she doesn't simply decide to write about whatever topics she "[feels] like" is that "that's not how stuff works; it's not how life works; it's not how writing works. Not for me, at least." She explains that, as she writes for multiple audiences, she is aware of sensibilities among her readers with regard to topics seen as "immodest," particularly among readers who share her Pashtun background. Although she writes that she is not especially concerned about "losing certain audiences," and that this has likely happened with some readers anyway, the "care" that she feels for some of her Pashtun readers is currently stronger than her desire to write about certain more controversial topics. She also writes that even posting pictures of her face (which she does in the post) is considered culturally taboo, and that in that context, writing about "sexy" topics is a leap that she is not yet prepared to make.

Shehnaz's writings on "sexy talk" reflect a recognition of a sense of conflict between her desire to write about certain topics and her very conscious decision not to (yet). The

tension seems especially salient in a post where she raises topics such as menstruation, and uses the word “sexy” multiple times, even while designating these as topics that she chooses not to discuss. On the one hand, she writes, “I understand that this must sound like I’m giving in to patriarchal rules here (I probably am),” but on the other, she argues that because she “not yet ready to talk about those things” anyway, the decision to avoid those topics for the moment is “not a problem that’s killing me or is stripping me of my agency.” She warns readers, however, that she will start writing about more controversial “sexually taboo topics” soon. Further, she notes that she *does* already write with some frequency about “homosexuality,” also a topic considered “immodest” within the cultural context she describes, reflecting a dynamic process of negotiating comfort levels and a desire to speak that may shift according to context and topic.

By describing the ability to talk about “sexy” topics as a privilege, Shehnaz reframes the conversation in two ways. First, she moves the attention away from the people who avoid these topics (regardless of whether this is a reflection of oppression or “giving in to patriarchal rules”) and towards the people who do write publicly about these issues, putting the emphasis on members of the latter group having privilege, rather than on the limitations faced by members of the former. Second, she establishes that the issue is a systemic one linked to a number of social factors, and not simply a result of individual decisions. In doing this, Shehnaz pushes back against those (real or hypothetical) who might criticise her for not writing about “sexy” topics, arguing that such criticism comes partly from people who have power because of their social location that other people don’t have. She also acknowledges the different risks and calculations that arise for different

women, highlighting that the choice to write publicly has different consequences depending on each person's social location.

In a subsequent post, published just over a week later, Shehnaz takes up the topic of menstruation much more explicitly, acknowledging that she had not originally intended to delve into the topic in such depth so soon (28 March 2015). She explains the post in part as a reaction to reading about Rupī Kaur, the poet and artist mentioned on page 172, whose photographic self-portraits depicting menstrual blood were twice taken down by Instagram because of claims of policy violations. Shehnaz challenges the misogyny inherent in discourses on women's bodies, looking not only at menstruation but also at breasts and breastfeeding, and the "hypocritical expectations" placed on women who are told to cover up while breastfeeding, even as breasts are so publicly visible and sexualised in advertisements and popular media. Shehnaz is clear that, while she objects both to forcing women to cover their breasts while nursing (or to hide the fact that they are menstruating) and to hypervisibility of women's breasts in other contexts, her aim is not to prescribe a singular ideal for the public role of women's bodies. Rather, she notes explicitly that it is important not to "[disregard] women's choice to show or cover as much skin as they'd like or as they believe is important."

Shehnaz again discusses menstruation in a post a few weeks later, where she shares a video of a woman performing a poem about periods. She captions it with an expression of solidarity and love "to all menstruating girls and women out there," and a prayer that "we all come to love ourselves, our bodies, our period as a blessing and not as an impure, disgusting, ugly source of discomfort and pain" (Orbala, 13 April 2015). While Shehnaz continues to avoid explicit discussion of her own physical experiences of menstruation in

the ways Nahida and Kirstin have written about, the repeated presence of posts related to menstruation on her blog, especially after a long period where it was never discussed at all, suggests a shift in the sensibilities or priorities described in her earlier discussion about “sexy” topics. As noted in Chapter 2, blogging allows for such shifts to be tracked and documented, as bloggers’ positions can evolve while their past discussions remain accessible. In this example, the blog makes this shift visible within a real-time documentation of the progression of the writer’s interpretations and decisions about which interpretations to share publicly. Shehnaz’s stated plan to eventually discuss “taboo” topics more frequently and extensively in the future further underlines the importance of the temporal dimension of blogging (and *tafsir* through blogging) as an ongoing conversation in which changes in ideas and practices are often an inherent component.

Shehnaz ends her “sexy talk” post with a reference back to the nail polish posts at Nahida’s blog: “until I begin writing on sexually provocative or taboo topics, I am going to be reading and supporting what The Fatal Feminist writes over at her blog – and going hmph the whole time. #love.” Again, Shehnaz expresses a tension in her own perspective; the juxtaposition of “hmph” and “#love” reflects a frustration with the priority placed on certain topics, while expressing support for those who do engage with those topics. Even as Shehnaz proceeds in subsequent posts to write more openly about “sexually provocative” topics, such as menstruation, this tension remains relevant as a reminder that the presence or absence of writing about certain topics is the result of a complicated set of decisions that are not immediately apparent to the reader. Shehnaz’s points here are important for this dissertation not only because she responds directly to the preliminary research I had presented at the AAR conference, but also because her words raise an

important concern about how the emphasis in this work on public narratives of menstruation may be read. The graphic descriptions of menstruation raised through Nahida's and Kirstin's posts represent one important way that Muslim feminist bloggers can challenge social expectations that would relegate menstruation strictly to a very private sphere, but this should not be seen as the only way for Muslim women (or anyone) to demonstrate freedom or empowerment as far as their bodies are concerned. In other words, while Shehnaz argues that the "choice" to "speak about whatever is important to you" should be an option that all women are able to exercise, she does not claim that the availability of this option should require women to write about "sexy" topics in order to be seen as empowered (Orbala, 19 March 2015).

Conclusion

The writing about menstruation on these three blogs reflects a dynamic process of *tafsir* through blogging, in which the bloggers engage with Islamic legal rulings around purity and ritual practice, as well as cultural expectations from both within and outside of Muslim communities regarding the appropriateness of speaking publicly about one's body and menstrual cycle. The temporal nature of blogging comes into play both in documenting monthly cycles and in marking shifts in perspective and in writing decisions over time. The bloggers also use narratives of experience in order to uncover gaps in dominant religious discourses, and ways that these discourses have come to position bodies that menstruate as impure or contaminating. And yet, as Shehnaz writes, "none of this is to suggest that sexy talk is any more important than non-sexy talk" (19 March 2015). While online discussions about menstruation provide a vivid example of some of the creative and critical

work being done by Muslim feminists to disrupt some of the discourses that govern women's bodies and their narratives thereof, Shehnaz's words remind us that writing seen as "sexy" or provocative should not be reified as the only possibility for feminist action.

Chapter 4: “Beyond the Jurisprudential Bedroom”: Blogging Queer Issues and Uncertainty

In a blog post published on August 21, 2012, blogger Ify Okoye begins with a quote from Rachel Maddow, a queer television host in the United States, about the “moral imperative” for queer-identified Americans to be “out” as such if their circumstances permit it, not only for the individual’s own sake but also to push boundaries in the community and the country. Below the quote, she writes, “My name is Ify and this is a part of my story.” Ify explains that being queer is something she knows deeply about herself and that, given the importance of the connection that she feels to God, family, and friends, the anxiety and fear that she was feeling as she kept her sexual orientation hidden was becoming too much (Okoye, 21 August 2012). In the same post, Ify relates an experience at the mosque that, as she told me later in an interview, was one of the final straws for her in finally deciding to come out to her readers and community. She writes about an imam at Friday prayers who called on the congregation to support a petition against gay marriage, and explains that, “As a joke at the end of the sermon, the imam said, ‘We all know that God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve,’ which received some chuckles from the audience.” Ify offers a correction to the imam’s comments: “God not only made Adam and Eve,” she explains, “but he also made Steve and me.” In the conclusion of her post, Ify writes that

I try to listen attentively with all of my being to hear the whispers of the divine message in my life. I’ve been deeply inspired by people across faith traditions who in their negotiation of faith have found it within themselves to recognize and respect each person’s inherent dignity and to love for others what they love

for themselves. Slowly, I've gained the courage to allow my family and some friends in to get to know me and have been surprised to find their hearts soft and open enough to continue to love and embrace me even if it's not always easy.

I am not giving up on my faith. (Okoye, 21 August 2012)

This post was clearly a surprise to many of Ify's readers, perhaps especially because some of her earlier posts, as well as her past involvement with the AlMaghrib Institute and the Muslim Matters blog, had suggested an ideological alignment with groups seen as fairly conservative. In the comment section of this post, Ify responds to a number of reactions, including from a former (male) fiancé and others who identify themselves as personal friends of hers, as well as commenters who appear not to know her personally. While some of the comments are positive and supportive, many question her not only about what she is saying about her own sexuality but also about her decision to speak publicly about something that many commenters view as sinful. Ify's responses emphasise the value she places on her own self-knowledge and on her desire to live with honesty and integrity instead of hiding this part of herself, along with her recognition that, although she is not entirely sure how to understand queer⁴² sexualities in an Islamic framework, she

⁴² Although the language on this topic has been highly contested, I use "queer" here for a number of reasons. Kugle (2010) favours the term "homosexuality," noting the history of the word "queer" as a slur (p. 13), a decision with which I can sympathise. At the same time, given the ways that the word "queer" has been reclaimed and positioned as empowering, and the frequency with which it is now used in academic literature, I feel comfortable supporting its reclamation as a positive term by using it in my own work. In fact, in one of her posts, Ify writes disparagingly about the use of the word "homosexual," which she sees as outdated and offensive (6 June 2010). Given that she is the only queer blogger in my study, I prefer to follow her lead and avoid that term in favour of "queer," which she does use to self-identify (she also uses the word "gay"). Moreover, the word "homosexual" suggests attraction to the same sex only, while the notion of queerness allows for more fluidity in understanding non-heteronormative sexualities. I also generally prefer to avoid acronyms like LGBTQ in recognition that, while trans issues are deeply important, they are largely absent from this study. In this light, it seems inappropriate to use a term that includes the "T," suggesting that the

understands God to be a source of compassion and wisdom and a force beyond what humans can grasp. The narratives she shares about her own sexuality thus form a way of engaging with Islamic law and ethics, as well as community expectations.

This chapter focuses on the bloggers' interventions when it comes to queer issues in a Muslim context. Given the pervasiveness of a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality around queer issues within many Muslim communities (Ali, 2006), the very act of writing publicly about the topic, like the topic of menstruation, is in itself a way of challenging dominant interpretations and cultural expectations. Whether they identify as queer or straight, these bloggers consider the issues in a number of ways, including thinking through their own sexuality, positioning themselves as allies, or drawing comparisons with analogous or imagined experiences of exclusion. Often, the bloggers use these narratives to point to what they see as gaps or inconsistencies in what they understand to be the dominant religious perspective on non-heterosexual relationships. I argue that the blog posts on this topic represent examples for how *tafsir* through blogging might respond to other recent questions raised with regard to gender and Islam. Specifically, I consider Kecia Ali's (2006) work on sexual ethics in Islam, which points to a greater need to incorporate questions of ethics into issues that are often discussed primarily along the lines of legal permissibility. I also consider here Aysha A. Hidayatullah's (2014) writing on the directions that Muslim feminism may need to take in order to maintain its credibility as an intellectual trend within contemporary Islamic thought.

present analysis also applies to them. When quoting from the blogs or from academic sources, I will use the language that they use, but my own reflections are framed through the lens of the word "queer."

Queer issues in Islam: Looking for new directions

In Chapter 3, I looked at how the bloggers in this dissertation engage with Islamic law, reinforcing some dominant interpretations and rejecting others, while at the same time pointing to important issues that lie outside the scope of what the law governs. This chapter expands on many of those arguments. In some ways, my attention to the bloggers' engagement with (or rejection of) jurisprudence and legal rulings may seem out of place. If the aim of this chapter is to consider the ways these Muslim bloggers challenge or circumvent legal questions, then what is the relevance of contrasting their writing to decisions arrived at through formal legal methodologies that sometimes seem to carry little weight as far as these women are concerned? It is, indeed, important to keep in mind that manifestations of Islam in societies across diverse times and places have often looked very different from what may have been established in local civil or religious legal codes as permissible or impermissible. The very methodologies by which permissibility is established have also varied widely. And yet notions of what is allowed and not allowed under Islamic law – such as the circumstances under which one can pray or make valid ablutions, or the people with whom one can have sex – continue to play a role in the ways the bloggers narrate their own practices and ideas, even if their response is to reject the dominant interpretations. Moreover, legal language and principles can also be seen in the context to which the bloggers respond in their blog posts, and in the comments left by readers.

In one of her interviews with Muslim women in South Africa who had experienced domestic abuse, Shaikh (2007) spoke with Fatima, a woman who had been told by an imam that, according to the *shari'ah*, she was religiously required to sign a document granting her

violent ex-husband some property rights as well as access to their children. Fatima says that she told the imam “*Shari’ah* is fine, I’m not arguing with *Shari’ah*, but I have a valid reason for not wanting to allow him rights to the children” (p. 84). Fatima’s words suggest that, while she is not dismissing the principles of *shari’ah* entirely, such principles take a backseat in that moment to the more urgent question of what she knows about her husband and, by extension, about why she should not sign the document presented by the imam. Her location in a country where religious jurists are not backed by the state also facilitates her ability to reject the imam’s request. Linking this example to Shaikh’s broader exploration of the notion of *tafsir* through praxis, we can see that Fatima’s earlier experiences inform her rejection of a particular interpretation of *shari’ah* as it applies to her. Shaikh also explains that the women she interviewed interpreted the Qur'an in relation “to a broader Islamic framework where an ethics of justice and fair treatment is seen to be integral to the revelatory message,” even to the point, in one instance, of a woman crossing out verse 4:34⁴³ because of the potential for misinterpretation (p. 86). The broader ethical framework comes to take precedence over specific texts, in ways that might be similar to Amina Wadud’s (2006) notion of saying “no” to certain understandings of the Qur’an (p. 200) or Khaled Abou El Fadl’s (2001) idea of a “conscientious pause” (p. 213). In both of these cases, the authors recommend rejecting particular interpretations – even when these interpretations may seem most obvious on the surface – without rejecting the Qur’an itself, leaving open possibilities for alternate readings even if such readings are not immediately apparent.

⁴³ Discussed at more length in Chapter 2 (see p. 108 onwards), this verse has often been read as establishing men as superior to women and giving husbands the right to hit their wives.

Similarly, while the bloggers in this study generally do not dispense with religious rulings altogether, at least not in theory, and while they remain committed to the Qur'an as a central text, their writing reflects ways they challenge, adapt, and tweak existing rulings with regard to their individual situations and practices. Their approach, in most cases, fits into what Ayesha S. Chaudhry (2013) characterises as a "reformist" approach, one in which proponents "are willing to sacrifice any authority that might be garnered through an association with a patriarchal tradition in order to maintain the integrity of their egalitarian idealized cosmology" (p. 139), in contrast with approaches that position themselves as continuous in their methodologies with earlier historical traditions and more widely-accepted interpretations of key texts. Hidayatullah (2014) also suggests that Islamic feminists may need to acknowledge the limits of the degree to which gender-egalitarian principles can be read from the Qur'an. This acknowledgement, she argues, does not necessarily require a rejection of the Qur'an or of feminism, but may point to a need for new and creative strategies for reconciling Islamic texts with commitments to gender equality (p. 195). Reminding us that it is not unusual for Muslims to rely on knowledge from "non-Islamic" (not "un-Islamic") and secular sources such as natural and social sciences to inform their ethical decisions, Ali (2015) proposes that feminist ethics could also bring useful contributions to Muslim ethical discourse. There seems, in other words, to be an increased level of attention within Western Muslim academic work directed away from feminist re-readings of "traditional" Islamic sources. Instead, the scholars cited above look at how some Muslim feminists are stepping outside of those sources altogether, rooting themselves in ethical systems that include, but do not exclusively consist of, religious texts, and even sometimes preferring these apparently non-

Islamic systems of thought to what can be read from the more conventionally authoritative texts.

Academic re-readings of Islamic texts

As Samar Habib (2008) points out, any attempt to find justification for queer sexualities within Islam is often seen as “impossible,” “false,” or “really a very desperate attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable” (p. 32). Nonetheless, she argues for a “queer-friendly Islamic hermeneutics” that calls into question the dominant reasons given for prohibiting non-heterosexual relationships and that acknowledges that the history of Muslim scholarly condemnation of queerness is not as homogenous as it is often portrayed to be (Habib, 2008).⁴⁴ In his book *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (2010) examines issues of gender identity and queer sexualities in relation to the Qur’an and *hadith*, as well as Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, and mysticism. Kugle notes that many of the most emphatic condemnations of “homosexuality” come from the story of Prophet Lot (also known as Lut) in the Qur’an, as well as from *hadiths* stating, for example, that men who have anal sex with each other should be punished for adultery. With regard to the Lot story, Kugle argues that what is being condemned is not sexual attraction per se, and not even the act of anal sex, but rather an entire range of immoral behaviours, including anal rape. He contends that the story is not about consensual anal sex between same-sex-attracted men at all, and that it is therefore illogical to consider it as a basis for a blanket condemnation of sex between men.

⁴⁴ In fact, Habib (2007) has written extensively about queer relationships among women throughout the history of Arab and Muslim communities, arguing that there is a long history of literary and cultural representations of such relationships.

In his study of *hadiths* related to queer sexual relations, Kugle (2010) argues that many of the *hadiths* that have been used as a basis for legal rulings on the topic are weak⁴⁵ and, in many cases, are likely forged; he also argues many of the ones that do condemn particular sex acts do not advocate specific legal punishments (p. 88). In a later study, Kugle (2014) writes about the notion of *fitra*, “an Arabic term meaning one’s ‘essential nature,’” as also being a source of affirmative support for queer Muslims who find meaning in the idea of queerness as an “original nature” and Islam as a path through which “to return to God in harmony with one’s own nature” (p. 25). Habib (2008) similarly explores the idea of queerness as *fitra*, meaning, in her view, that it is “in-born and that it is precisely part of the Creator’s intention” (p. 33). Kugle (2014) writes about his interviews with queer Muslims that many come to “engage religious tradition” through reinterpreting dominant patriarchal and homophobic discourses, whether by using resources from religious or secular education, or by referencing their own experiences (p. 53).

Kugle (2010) suggests that there is some scholarly disagreement on the severity of the sin when it comes to non-penetrative sexual acts between two women (p. 168), which tends to be much less discussed (and generally seen as less serious) than penetrative sex between two men. At the same time, Ali (2006) notes that when sex between women does arise in Islamic legal literature (usually defined as “tribadism” or “a woman doing with a woman something resembling what a man would do with her”), it is still designated as legally forbidden or sinful (p. 75), suggesting that any room for flexibility provided by the silence only goes so far. Dervla Sara Shannahan (2010) observes that the lack of attention

⁴⁵ The designation of a *hadith* as “weak” means that it cannot be reliably confirmed to have been said by the Prophet Muhammad; this designation is often based on missing links in a chain of oral transmission, or narrators who were known to be unreliable (Kugle, 2010, p. 79).

to women's issues is not confined to more supposedly conservative scholars either. She writes that, while overall she finds Kugle's re-reading of the Lot story to be compelling and personally comforting, it is silent on queer women and as such its "queer-affirmation is one based on male desires, experiences and bodies" (p. 679). Western academic scholarship on queer Muslims has also focused mainly on men and only very rarely on women (Siraj, 2011, 2012). It seems, then, that even among queer Muslims (and their allies), there may be work to do to ensure that the existence and presence of queer Muslim women is acknowledged and affirmed in textual interpretations.

Textual rereadings thus appear to form an important part of how queer Muslims and their allies navigate communities and traditions that are often unsympathetic. At the same time, Ali (2006) is much more cautious than Kugle in her evaluation of what can be challenged while still locating oneself within what may be seen as traditional texts or methods of interpretation. And yet, Ali does not suggest that advocates for queer Muslims should abandon their project entirely. While she argues that there is no affirmative support within the historical Islamic tradition for legally-recognised relationships (such as marriage) between people of the same sex, she also points to potential inequalities and ethical problems that exist within relationships and institutions that *are* legally permitted. These include the marriage contract for heterosexual marriages, historically seen as allowing a husband sexual access to his wife for the agreed-upon *mahr* (a gift given by the husband to the wife as part of the marriage contract), and the legal acceptance of men keeping female slaves as concubines. Ali argues for the incorporation of contemporary understandings of ethics and consent into the criteria that are used to judge sexual relationships, instead of focusing only on legal permissibility (p. 96). Ali's suggestions here

reflect similar points made by Hidayatullah (2014), previously discussed in Chapter 2, who has suggested that Muslim feminists may need to confront the limitations of the Qur'anic text when it comes to gender issues – and, we may add here, queer issues – and seek new ways to articulate an Islamic path towards gender equality.

Navigating queer issues in a contemporary North American Muslim context

A number of relatively recent mainstream media stories involving North American Muslim communities or public figures responding to issues of queer sexualities and relationships have positioned Muslim scholars and laypeople as being especially intolerant of same-sex relationships and of anyone on the LGBTQ spectrum. Qatar-based Canadian Muslim preacher Bilal Philips was expelled from Germany in 2011 for his belief that “according to Islamic law, homosexuals should be executed if they are caught in the act” (quoted in “Imam decries Islamophobia while Pride battles homophobia,” 2011). In Quebec, as the proposed Charter of “Quebec Values”⁴⁶ was being debated in early 2014, the spectre of headscarf-wearing Muslim women as homophobic and transphobic was raised during public hearings as a reason to support the adoption of the Charter (Mertl, 2014).⁴⁷ More recently, opposition to the new sexual education curriculum introduced in Ontario in 2015 frequently put Muslim families protesting the curriculum in the spotlight, among other reasons because of opposition among some Muslim parents to the curriculum’s open acknowledgement of queer families (Selley, 2015).

⁴⁶ The proposed legislation would have forbidden the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols among those working in Quebec government institutions. See Bakali (2015).

⁴⁷ Of course, it was never clear what banning headscarves from the public service would have done to reduce homophobia or transphobia, but that is another discussion.

Although these stories are often sensationalised, even the Muslim public figures who take a more conciliatory tone often stop far short of condoning queer relationships, taking instead a “hate the sin, not the sinner”⁴⁸ approach. In an article posted on the widely-read and Salafi-oriented website Muslim Matters, Yasir Qadhi wrote in 2009 that while same-sex attraction is not itself sinful, any kind of sexual contact between members of the same sex is still understood to be strictly forbidden, and to argue otherwise would constitute *kufur* (disbelief) (Qadhi, 2009). Hamza Yusuf, an American Islamic scholar and co-founder of Zaytuna College, a Muslim liberal arts college in California, took a similar approach in a speech he gave at a conference in 2010. He argued that, while being attracted to someone of the same sex is not forbidden, “the idea of acting on it, and also just purely rectal [inter]course for male and female is also prohibited, it's simply seen as something that harms people, and so that physical act is prohibited” (Yusuf Hanson, 2010). Still, he continued by saying that “it is important to humanise people and not to dehumanise people.” Interestingly, Yusuf’s remarks also reveal the extent to which discourses about queer relationships often exclude women. By conflating “the act” of sexual intercourse between two people of the same sex with the specific act of anal sex (which he seems to understand as specifically involving anal penetration by a penis), Yusuf also implicitly imagines the queer people in question as cisgender⁴⁹ gay men. While he would almost certainly also be opposed to the idea of sex between two women, his suggestion that there is one main “act” that matters in a legal framework still puts sexual acts between women into a kind of grey zone, where they are not necessarily permitted but

⁴⁸ For a critique of similar discourses within the context of United States politics and society, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2003).

⁴⁹ In other words, someone whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy.

also sometimes not considered enough to be explicitly forbidden either.⁵⁰ Worth noting here is that the question of permissibility, framed in legal terms, takes a central role in many of these discussions. At the same time, the scope of what legal rulings can encompass is usually related to particular actions. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, one of the recurring challenges to the position that same-sex relationships or sexual orientations are forbidden involves pointing out the many dimensions of such relationships and orientations (including attraction and affection) that do not fall within the scope of “traditional” Islamic legal reasoning.

Other prominent Muslim public figures who root themselves in relatively “traditional” perspectives have tentatively moved towards expressing slightly more support for queer individuals and communities. While working as imam at a mosque in Boston, Suhaib Webb said in a newspaper interview that Muslim communities will soon have no choice but to acknowledge the presence of queer Muslims, and that religious leaders who do not do so will be “irrelevant in 10 years” (quoted in Wangsness, 2013). Ify writes about Sherman Jackson, an imam and professor who has argued that, as an American who supports the rights enshrined in the United States constitution, he supports the rights of same-sex couples to marry (Okoye, 21 December 2008). Even in these cases, however, both Webb and Jackson stop short of condoning queer relationships from an Islamic standpoint. It is worth pointing out, of course, that while same-sex intimacy has always existed in various forms, the idea of queerness or “homosexuality” as a sexual orientation or identity is a relatively new category, and specifically rooted in modern

⁵⁰ Yusuf made a very similar comment at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit Knowledge Retreat, which I attended in Toronto in December 2010, suggesting that his framing of the “act” as a sexual encounter between two men is not simply a one-time slip.

Western discourses (see Foucault, 1978). This means, among other things, that conversations about the religious (im)permissibility of “being” queer have little claim to rootedness in “traditional” texts, and that the presence of, for example, emotional and romantic intimacy within a queer relationship is also largely unaddressed within a classical legal framework that focuses so narrowly on the sex act itself (Ali, 2006; Kugle, 2010).

In other cases, queer issues can be dismissed in Muslim contexts not necessarily for being seen as inappropriate or provocative (or at least not explicitly for this reason) but simply because they are seen as not important. Jamillah Karim (2005) writes about an interview she conducted with Tayyibah Taylor, the founder of *Azizah* magazine, a publication geared towards Muslim women in the United States. In response to some readers calling for the magazine to discuss queer issues and queer Muslims, Taylor told Karim that “It is not a very central part right now [of what] most of our readers are interested in reading about.” Karim writes that “for Tayyibah, *Azizah*’s beginnings reflected her personal ambitions, but her end product must reflect collective interests and commercial viability” (p. 180). We might ask who falls under Taylor’s understanding of “our readers,” particularly when it seems clear that some readers *were* indeed asking for the magazine to lend greater attention to this topic. Even if, in this instance, neither *Azizah* magazine nor Taylor herself espoused a specifically homophobic viewpoint or took any kind of legalistic or moral stance on queer issues, the conceptualisation of queer issues as being outside of what constitutes “collective interests” may still serve to marginalise queer readers, reinforcing the idea that their specific interests are at best unimportant to the larger U.S. Muslim community.

At the same time, as noted in to the discussion about menstruation in Chapter 3, mainstream non-Muslim Western societies are not havens of queer positivity either, as much as the opposite suggestion may be used at times to paint Muslim communities as particularly backwards. Discourses assuming Muslims to be collectively homophobic have been used to marginalise Muslims in Western contexts, as was seen in the above example of the Quebec Charter, and to bolster homonationalist claims to justify imperialist actions abroad (in other words, imperialist discourses directed at saving queer people from their homophobic societies) (Puar, 2007; Massad, 2002). Muslims in the West who identify as queer are also often confronted with Islamophobia within queer spaces (Shannahan, 2010, p. 675). Thus, while this chapter is focused mainly on bloggers' engagements with Muslim communities and interpretations of Islamic texts, it is important to keep in mind that homophobia and heteronormativity are not uniquely Muslim concepts and that they inform the larger Western societies in which the bloggers live as well.

Moreover, Muslim perspectives on these issues are far from monolithic, and aside from the blog writing discussed in this chapter, many other Muslims in North America are engaging with queer issues in a number of ways. In response to the opposition to the aforementioned sexual education curriculum in Ontario (see p. 212), a Muslim coalition has emerged in support of the initiative (Rushowy, 2015). A performance piece created by Terna Tilley-Gyado and Wazina Zondon, entitled "Coming Out Muslim: Radical Acts of Love," opened in New York City in 2011 and has since been performed across the United States (Mase, 2014). The project also prompted a blog (<http://comingoutmuslim.com/>), which includes links to other online forums for queer Muslims, such as I Am Not Haraam (<http://iamnotharaam.tumblr.com/>) and a Queer Muslims Tumblr site

(<http://queermuslims.tumblr.com/>). In more explicitly religious contexts, spaces like El-Tawhid Juma Circle in Toronto and related smaller groups across Canada, and public figures like the imam Daaiyee Abdullah, who is based in Washington, D.C., are building a marginal but persistent set of alternative religious discourses that affirm the presence of queer and trans Muslims (Kugle, 2014). Still, queer Muslim identities are still seen as incongruous in many spaces, not only within Muslim communities but also in queer-focused spaces, where many Muslims have talked about a need to hide or justify their religious identities (Abraham, 2009).

Carving out space in a climate of “don’t ask, don’t tell”

Ali (2006) writes that many scholars who see same-sex sexual relationships as sinful still concede that same-sex attraction occurs naturally, but see it as a test for the individual to overcome. In other words, they argue that the presence of the desire is not itself something that can be condemned, but that the individual is responsible for refraining from ever acting on that desire. She contends that such a position is inconsistent with how the same scholars address opposite-sex attraction. Ali points, as an example, to British Islamic scholar and public figure Abdal-Hakim Murad. Considering that Murad is such a strong proponent of gender segregation as a way of avoiding inappropriate sexual encounters, having advocated a societal solution to the risks posed by opposite sex attraction, Ali argues that it seems contradictory and unrealistic for him to argue that people attracted to members of their own sex should be seen as individually responsible for refraining from ever fulfilling their sexual desires (pp. 88-89). She also maintains that,

given the importance Islam places on sex and sexual satisfaction, it seems cruel to deny this to those who experience exclusively same-sex attraction.

Thus, Ali (2006) claims that queer Muslims find themselves in a complicated position:

The two most salient principles are that one should not expose sinful behaviour, whether one's own or another's, and that it is a greater offense to deny certain rules than to break them. Taken together, these rules render any discussion of same-sex sexual intimacy a risky proposition, and make adherence to the 'don't ask, don't tell' status quo appealing for many. For others, however, the tacit toleration of illicit same-sex activity, provided one does not seek public affirmation of any intimate relationship, represents deep hypocrisy and a flagrant violation of other ethical principles. (p. 78)

Echoing the language of former U.S. military policies, Ali describes the "don't ask, don't tell" framework in this context as one where queer relationships are not condoned, but understood to exist, a principle that is effectively accepted as long as it is not stated aloud. While Ali's characterisation of the situation is descriptive rather than prescriptive, imam Suhaib Webb actually names the concept prescriptively, advocating that Muslim institutions should take up a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to queer community members – meaning that they should accept queer Muslims as people, without engaging in conversations about their sexual orientations or relationships (Abdulrahim, 2011). Webb was later criticised for that suggestion by an imam who accused him of "poisoning Muslim youth" (Abdulrahim, 2011). From the other side, as Ali also notes, the idea of having to perpetually keep one's relationships hidden from one's religious community – or, we might

add, of having to “pass” as heterosexual and engage with expectations of eventual heterosexual marriage – may be untenable for many queer Muslims.

In contrast with the discussion in Chapter 3 of issues of menstruation, the reigning climate of “don’t ask, don’t tell” results in higher levels of risk when it comes to talking publicly about queer issues. While speaking publicly about being on one’s period can be seen as culturally taboo or otherwise inappropriate, perhaps as behaviour to be avoided, it is often not as harshly sanctioned as talking publicly about what is seen in many contexts as “sinful” behaviour. If, as Ali (2006) notes above, those writing about queer relationships are seen to be “[denying] certain rules” (p. 78), it becomes even more serious from a theological and jurisprudential standpoint. As noted above (see p. 213), Qadhi (2009) contends that this rejection of widely accepted rulings is enough to put someone outside of Islam. Of course, Muslims who write about these issues from a more queer-positive perspective likely disagree with Qadhi’s assessment, but the potential risks in discussing these issues openly, and the kinds of expectations that are disrupted by such discussions, are significantly different from those that exist around stories of menstruation.

Reconsidering queer sexualities

As seen in the vignette that opened this chapter, and echoing some of the posts about menstruation discussed in Chapter 3, the topic of queer sexualities in Islam raises questions about what can or should be discussed publicly, as well as what is missing or not working in some of the dominant ways the issue is presented. Across the four blogs examined in this dissertation, discussions of queer issues raise questions and tensions regarding how to understand sexual diversity in relation to personal experiences, feminist

perspectives on sexuality, and Islamic ethics, values, and legal rulings. Although Ify is the only one of the bloggers who self-identifies as gay, all four demonstrate a preoccupation with homophobia within Muslim communities and with questions about how to support queer Muslims and affirm queer sexualities. As was the case with the topic of menstruation explored in the previous chapter, discussions on these blogs about queer issues challenge expectations around what can be talked about publicly and which issues should be kept quiet. They also point to some of the limitations and gaps in discourses in dominant Islamic jurisprudence that paint same-sex relationships as deviant or forbidden. Conversations around queer issues again highlight the role of *tafsir* through blogging not only by developing new or alternative religious interpretations but also by expanding the terms of the debate and the scope of what is taken into account.

All four of the writers I interviewed spoke, unprompted, about queer issues in my interviews with them. Three of them specifically raised the topic in response to a question I asked about what they saw as the main concerns and problems that they were writing about with regard to Islam and gender. (In my interview with Kirstin Dane of wood turtle, I did not phrase the question in the same way, but this topic was one that she did bring up in the interview as well). Given that this issue has yet to receive extensive attention within the field of Muslim feminist work, it was striking to hear all four of these bloggers designate it as a priority.

Using blogs to re-read religious texts

The four blogs in this research illustrate a number of ways bloggers use scripture, laws, experience, and other reflections as a way of developing new readings of queer issues

in a religious context. As they discuss the topic, the bloggers engage to some degree with dominant textual interpretations and legal rulings, although as much of this chapter will show, the bulk of their engagement seems to focus on other strategies. Nahida's approach to the story of Lot is similar to Kugle's, discussed above (see p. 209).⁵¹ She writes that the people of Sodom "were serial rapists, who drank heavily, attacked visitors in gangs, lusted after the power of angels, knew first hand of God but refused morality and cheated and lied and thieved," and expresses incredulity that God's punishment of them could be due to their sexual orientation (the fatal feminist, 28 May 2011). Nahida notes that she believes anal sex (between any two people) to be a sin, but that anal sex is not coterminous either with gay sex or with being queer, and that in itself, "being gay is not a sin." She argues that the amount of attention in Muslim communities to queer issues and condemnation of non-heterosexual sex is a result of homophobia, not of any sincere commitment to religious tenets.

In one blog post, Shehnaz responds to a relative silence within Islamic legal discourses when it comes to queer women, noting that legal prescriptions that advocate gender segregation and lay out rules for how much of their body women can expose around other women (more of their body than can be exposed around men who are not their relatives) is predicated on heteronormative assumptions that women will not be attracted to other women (Orbala, 16 September 2012). Kirstin relates an experience of having to negotiate exactly that question when wondering about whether to wear her headscarf at an all-women party where a number of guests identified as queer. This was

⁵¹ Although Nahida does not cite Kugle directly in the post, his book *Homosexuality in Islam* is listed on a general page of references on her blog, so we can assume that his thinking on this issue has had at least some influence on hers.

again a kind of grey area with regard to the rulings she followed about the contexts where covering is required, although she eventually explained that “the Qur’an (24:31) teaches that women do not have to guard their modesty among one another,” and that covering was based on “gender, not sexuality” (7 October 2010). The silence on same-sex relationships among women may be seen by the bloggers and by other Muslim feminists as an opportunity for expanding how broadly the texts and rulings can be read. In her own re-reading of the Lot story, Nahida also makes reference to “legal opinion implying that lesbianism isn’t really a violation of anything, because supposedly there’s no anal sex involved,” although she gives no reference to any of these “opinions” (28 May 2011).

Queer issues, personal stories, and *tafsir* through blogging

Along with commenting on scripture and legal texts, the bloggers in this dissertation incorporate personal narratives into their explanations as they develop their positions on queer issues. Given the earlier anecdote about Ify identifying herself as gay, the personal relevance of this topic for her is obvious, as is the potential role that stories of experience may play in her explanations of her own understandings. But what of the other three bloggers in this study, who identify as heterosexual? Although there are some clear differences between how they write about queer issues as opposed to topics with which their personal experience is more direct, such as menstruation or prayer spaces, I argue that there are nonetheless some key ways personal narratives are invoked within their practice of *tafsir* through blogging, even in cases where the issue is somewhat removed from the writer. Examining these processes with attention to both thematic elements (what is being discussed) and performative ones (what purpose do narratives play within a

particular argument) allows for an expanded understanding of how narratives of personal experience come into conversation with readings of scripture and legal texts. It also provides further illustrations of what *tafsir* through blogging looks like.

A post on wood turtle that focuses on queer issues in Islam begins with an anecdote: “When my best girlfriend came out, I hugged her. We didn’t really speak about her sexuality — history class and x-files (God, did I just date myself??!!?) were far more interesting topics” (wood turtle, 7 October 2010). As noted above, Kirstin was prompted to ask herself whether to wear a headscarf among queer women at a women-only party, which she decided she was not required to do. As the post progresses, Kirstin writes about a video made by a young gay Muslim man as part of the “It Gets Better” project initiated by the queer US-based sex columnist Dan Savage, a collection of YouTube videos made by people identifying along the LGBTQ spectrum and sending messages of hope to youth who may be struggling with homophobia. She writes about the “traditional position on homosexuality” – that “it’s a sin” – while also looking at people who have written about accepting queer Muslims despite the “sin,” and at “progressive” perspectives that challenge the idea of queerness being sinful at all. As the post closes, Kirstin argues that,

Even while supporting the traditional legal position on homosexuality, I think it’s rare that you hear a mainstream Muslim scholar coming right out and saying, you know what, Gay Muslims are our brothers and sisters in Islam. This means they are deserving of our love, support, and protection.

It’s our deeds that we will be held accountable for in the end. And no one has the right to assume that a person isn’t worthy of God’s love.

Kirstin uses her story about her friend as a kind of bridge between the “traditional legal position” and the reality of LGBTQ-identified people within Muslim and non-Muslim communities. On one side, as Kirstin points out, many such “traditional” readings of texts do not leave much wiggle room for concluding that queer sexualities are permissible. At the same time, she also observes that the experience of the young gay man in the video that she describes, as well as her own experience as a friend and ally to a queer non-Muslim friend, provide a context for thinking through how straight Muslims might (or, in Kirstin’s opinion, should) interact with members of LGBTQ communities, and the value of compassion and flexibility in considering what this looks like in practice. Thus, while the dominant texts to which she refers may take a strong stance from a legal perspective, Kirstin relies on narratives of experience to argue that legal permissibility of particular (sexual) relationships should not be the only question at stake, and that Muslims have ethical obligations to act in loving and supportive ways, regardless of their stance on whether particular relationships are legally acceptable. Her post also points to the importance of taking non-legal issues, and queer issues beyond specific sexual actions, into account. She provides one example for how to do so, by acknowledging dominant positions (and even, in this case, avoiding disagreeing with them directly), while keeping her focus on the impact of homophobia, the compatibility of “sexuality” with Islam, and the religious impetus to act with love and not to assume anyone to be outside of the realm of God’s love (wood turtle, 7 October 2010). For Kirstin, telling the story about her relationship with her friend forms part of a blogging praxis of cultivating and implementing a particular set of understandings and ethical practices.

Forging a path as a queer Muslim

In January 2012, Ify wrote two posts about a panel discussion that she attended at a mosque, entitled “The LGBT Community from an Islamic Perspective.” In the first post, she describes the discussion, which included a range of perspectives, from a focus on Qur’anic arguments against queer sexualities to an emphasis on the need to support and provide safe spaces for queer Muslims (without necessarily condoning their sexual orientation) (Okoye, 24 January 2012). The follow-up post is more critical of one of the speakers, and Ify also talks at length about the impact of the absence of any queer Muslims on the panel. She writes that “Any discussion about homosexuality that does not include the voices or perspectives of those in the LGBT community is incomplete,” arguing that the absence of queer voices on the panel suggests that “the mosque is only willing to go so far in reaching out and jumpstarting discussion” (Okoye, 28 January 2012). Although these posts were published about seven months before Ify first publicly identified herself as gay, the value that Ify placed on the consideration of personal experience in these earlier conversations on queer Muslims helps ground the significance of the perspective that she shares in her later writing, as she takes up her own appeal for space for queer Muslims to tell their own stories.

In her initial “coming out” post, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Ify writes about the weight of the fear and anxiety she experienced for years at not being able to share this part of herself with friends or family, and about the importance that she places on her faith (Okoye, 21 August 2012). Her next post, “Gay Muslim Survival Guide,” came

nearly eight months later.⁵² In that post, Ify explains that she had been asked by a number of people “to explain or clarify issues raised in [her] coming out post,” and that she hoped both to respond to that request and to provide advice for other queer Muslims. She writes about the complicated and intensely personal negotiations involved in trying to understand sexual orientation in relation to Islamic principles, and whether or how to “come out” to other people (Okoye, 1 April 2013). A year after that, Ify wrote a post entitled “Moving Forward Amid Disagreement about Gay Muslims” (Okoye, 14 February 2014). In this post, Ify looks to Kugle’s writing on queer issues in Islam and Muslim communities, as well as Rabbi Steven Greenberg’s similar work in a Jewish context, for advice on how religious traditions and communities may better support and embrace queer members. A final post on queer issues came eight months later, responding to an advice piece on the blog Muslim Matters, where a writer had written an answer to a young woman who wrote in asking for guidance in relation to her sexual attraction to other women. The Muslim Matters piece describes queer sexualities as “unnatural,” and warns against the “gay agenda” (Umm Zakiyyah, 2014). It also criticises an unnamed “lesbian blogger who professes to be Muslim.” Ify identifies herself as the blogger quoted in the piece, which she sees as “really just a continued dig at [her].” She uses her own blog post as a way of providing alternate advice, encouraging the young women to seek out queer-positive Muslim spaces, and to hold onto her faith (Okoye, 14 November 2014).

In many instances, Ify uses her own stories and experiences, and those of others, to expand the terrain of the discussion. She notes that Faisal Alam, an American activist who

⁵² The frequency of Ify’s posts had already been decreasing, although the eight-month silence was still a stark drop. Ify explained this to me and wrote about it in a subsequent post (16 March 2014), explaining that the lack of posts was a result of shifting ideas and priorities in general, not as something linked to her discussions of queer issues.

is also Muslim and gay, has described queer Muslims as a “spiritually wounded” community, highlighting the spiritual and emotional imperative for Muslim communities to engage with queer individuals (Okoye, 14 February 2014). She argues that heterosexual Muslims who push queer Muslims to “[remain] closeted” fail to recognise the double standard “when they themselves are completely open and in your face about the reality of their own orientation and relationships,” as people openly married to (or seeking spouses among) members of the opposite sex (1 April 2013). By being open about her own sexuality, Ify exposes the heteronormative privileges enjoyed by many straight Muslims who may otherwise have no reason to reflect on their positioning. Ify also writes that, “When I stand before God to pray, I am Muslim, a human being, a daughter, a woman, a sister, black, gay, American, a nurse, a neighbor, a student and so much more than these labels can convey” (1 April 2013). Her incorporation of multiple identifications here helps to disrupt discussions of queer issues within Islamic legal fields that focus solely on sexual orientation or sexual acts, instead listing “gay” as one of many identities, rather than as a label that eclipses all others.

Ify told me in her interview that she had read every book or article and watched every YouTube video that she could find about queer issues in Islam, something she had been doing for over twelve years. Her writing on queer issues points to the limitations of existing structures and discourses on a topic with which she is intimately familiar both intellectually and personally. She writes,

While our community has many hang-ups when it comes to sexuality, I think part of the challenge of having a discussion with gay Muslims is an inability to see beyond the jurisprudential bedroom. Islamic law is concerned with

classifiable acts and is silent on matters, which are not so easily classified.

(Okoye, 1 April, 2013)

The backdrop of this narrow focus on the “jurisprudential bedroom” emphasises the potential contributions of personal narratives like Ify’s, which point to issues not covered in the discussion on specific sexual acts, issues such as love and companionship, among others, that are less easily regulated within a strictly legal framework. Moreover, Ify writes that attempts to condemn particular acts while “[loving] the person” are still “problematic.” She argues that even if such attempts might be less dangerous to queer Muslims than “the more fire and brimstone exclusionary types,” they still leave queer Muslims in a situation where their options are either a life of perpetual celibacy (which Ify describes as “unnatural and maybe even harmful”), or marriage with someone of the opposite sex, which she notes does not work for everyone, even “leaving aside the question of fairness to the unsuspecting spouse” (1 April 2013). Moreover, she notes that expectations placed on queer Muslims to keep quiet lead to “religiously sanctioned lying” (14 February 2014). She argues that, rather than needing “legal permission from religious authorities,” what queer Muslims “do need is a pragmatic religious and spiritual paradigm, which allows us to be fully present, seen, and included in our communities” (14 February 2014).

Despite these references to bedrooms, sex, and what is and is not permitted, Ify does not attempt in her posts to justify herself or her own sexual orientation within a framework of legal permissibility. Rather, she takes queerness as a given, both in her own situation and in that of other queer Muslims, and asks instead what it might look like for Muslim communities to support and embrace queer members of their communities, regardless of the legal issues. By removing the emphasis on questions that so often arise about whether

it is okay to be gay or to have same-sex relationships, Ify uses the contradictions and exclusions she has confronted to argue that questions about belonging and inclusion are more pressing.

Managing risks and reader responses on queer issues

Not surprisingly, despite Ify's attempts to shift the conversation elsewhere, questions about the legal permissibility of being queer continue to inform many people's responses to Ify's posts. Many of those responses are visible as comments on Ify's blog posts. She also mentioned to me in an interview that the initial "coming out" blog post prompted many people to email her, in some cases offering positive support and in other cases challenging her or offering advice about how to change her sexual orientation. The post also prompted various conversations in person with community members and scholars. In all these cases, many of the readers who expressed negative comments focused on what they saw as a clear prohibition from authoritative Islamic sources of any kind of same-sex relationships. Many others, taking this prohibition as a given, also responded to Ify's decision to speak publicly about her own identification as gay, citing religious principles against talking openly about one's "sins."

Ify has frequently been taken to task by her readers for the absence of citations from canonical Islamic sources to support her self-identification as queer. In an interview, Ify told me about one religious teacher she knew who challenged her on why she quoted Rachel Maddow in her original "coming out" post, but did not quote the Qur'an or any *hadith*. She explained that she was not trying to justify anything, and that quoting scripture was not immediately necessary for the point she was making. Similarly, in response to a

comment on one of her blog posts asking her to justify her position, Ify wrote, “I don’t believe in justifications. But I do believe strongly in the power of personal narrative in affecting how we and others view a situation” (Okoye, 21 August 2012). In rejecting the need for “justifications,” Ify is referring here to legal justifications, responding to those who use language of (im)permissibility to reproach her for what she writes. She is, on the other hand, trying to argue for Muslim communities to acknowledge the presence of queer members without condemnation. In that sense, there *is* something that Ify works to justify through her narratives, albeit not directly in a legal framework.

This personal narrative seems insufficient for many of Ify’s readers, however. Comments on some of Ify’s posts on this issue argue that there is no doubt that Islamic law forbids same-sex relationships. Sometimes it is not simply the absence of an analysis of religious texts that bothers readers, but rather Ify’s apparent lack of qualifications to interpret these texts. One commenter writes that Ify lacks the “required background in Arabic grammar and rhetoric” to properly understand the Qur’an, and that while her “interpretation might be valid from a modern liberal approach..., it is not so when it comes to the unbiased academic rigor of classical scholarship” (Ibn Masood, 3 September 2014). Other commenters similarly accuse Ify of being unqualified to make religious interpretations or judgements – which, it might be noted, is not something that Ify herself claims to have done.

Ify responds to these comments on legal permissibility in a number of ways. To those trying to educate her on why she is wrong, Ify notes in a comment that “I can assure you that I’ve probably spent more time reading, studying, reflecting and trying to understand the complexities of human sexuality than most of my critics” (Okoye, 21 August

2012). In response to one commenter who argues that “There is NO question or doubt about this being haram” (Sister, 15 January 2013), Ify counters by saying, “I don’t know what you mean by saying ‘this’ is haram. The fact that lgbt people exist is not forbidden, it’s simply a reality and fact” (Okoye, 21 August 2012). She notes that, given the innateness of orientation for many people, there should be nothing wrong in acknowledging this to be a reality. In this way, Ify points at the inadequacy of legalistic conceptions of what is allowed and forbidden to encompass all dimensions (particularly the non-sexual ones) of the lives and relationships of LGBT Muslims. At other moments, Ify appeals to broader religious principles that step outside of specific questions on the permissibility of same-sex relations. In response to a comment on another post, where the commenter wrote that “God... will never accept this” (amaal, 10 April 2013), Ify turns the question back on the commenter, asking, “Surely, you think that speaking without knowledge about God is an enormity?” (Okoye, 1 April 2013). In the same comment, Ify asks for God’s forgiveness for the earlier commenter and for “all of us really for our own lack of empathy and insight,” claiming religious high ground in a different way by appealing to a prophetic example of good manners rather than continuing the discussion about sex and sins.

The question of whether and how to speak publicly about one’s sexual orientation also arises frequently and, as Ify notes, is only ever named as a problem when the sexual orientation in question is non-heterosexual. One comment illustrates a recurring refrain:

it is one thing to fall into sin and another to consider it okay, yet another to call others to accept that it is okay, this is really a dangerous path. There is no difference in saying for instance; because I am an alcoholic and I can’t live

without it, not telling people that I am an alcoholic means that I am lying and people have to accept it as being okay. (Mamou, 19 July 2014)

Another writes that “Openly displaying one’s sinning... is worst than committing the act” (single green Muslimah, 9 July 2014), reflecting the climate of “don’t ask, don’t tell” that was discussed earlier in this chapter. For those who take this position, the issue is not only that the topic of Ify’s blog posts deals with something forbidden, but also that the posts themselves veer into “dangerous” territory, both ethically and legally, by speaking openly about behaviour seen as sinful without directly condemning it. Ify responds to comments like this by reiterating the personal importance of honesty and integrity. In one comment, she writes that, before speaking publicly about this topic, “one reason [she] chose to hide is not really out of a fear of God but out of a fear of people, which is problematic theologically” (Okoye, 21 August 2012). Again, Ify shifts the religious conversation from a legalistic discussion of what is allowed and forbidden to one focused on manners, character, and relationship with God. In doing so, she enacts a form of *tafsir* through blogging discussed in Chapter 2, where the blog becomes a space of public cultivation of particular religious sensibilities, echoing the work of Saba Mahmood (2005). In Ify’s case, self-disclosure is explicitly framed as a matter of personal integrity and overcoming one’s fear of other people in order to convey and cultivate a more honest relationship with God.

Ify does not talk about any “acts” she is “committing” that would fall directly under categories of the forbidden or sinful. Still, the suggestion on the part of the commenters that she is engaging in such acts, or that she is implicitly condoning particular behaviours, adds a layer and a weight to the question of speaking publicly about queer issues, especially from the first-person perspective of a queer-identified person, that was not

present in the discussions about menstruation in the previous chapter. After all, this topic entails not only the social pressures to keep certain “private” topics out of the public eye seen in some of the discussions on menstruation, but also the designation of this as a forbidden topic, one that it is not only improper (as in the case of menstruation) but also sinful to talk about publicly. While all of the bloggers discuss queer issues, Ify is the one who receives the most heated and most negative responses. This may be because her own identification as gay (and her frankness in talking about it) means that she is read as specifically trying to justify something, whereas the other bloggers have a layer of distance in being able to talk about the topic as something related mostly to other people.

Nevertheless, the topic of queer sexualities and relationships in Islam seems to carry personal risks (or perceived personal risks, at the very least) for the other bloggers as well. Shehnaz told me in an interview that she had lost at least one reader because of her discussions of queer issues on her blog. At the same time, she was emphatic both in the interview and in a blog post that she would continue to write about the topic even if readers were upset (Orbala, 19 March 2015). On the other hand, Kirstin mentioned this issue specifically in my interview with her as an example of something she had not discussed in depth on her blog, because she saw herself as “risk-averse” with regard to controversial topics. She explained that she did not want to potentially “alienate” certain “conservative” readers by being more explicit about her opinion that queer sexualities “should be allowable” in Islam. With the exception of the one post discussed above, in which she talks about the issue more directly – not taking a clear stance on legal permissibility, but nonetheless writing about the need for Muslim communities to support queer Muslims and affirm their presence (wood turtle, 7 October 2010) – most of her other

references to queer sexualities come up in “roundup” posts, lists of links to an assortment of recent articles of interest, in which she occasionally posts articles about Muslims fighting homophobia (28 May 2011; 23 July 2011; 2 March 2012; 7 April 2013). Kirstin does include short comments of her own in relation to each of the articles mentioned in the roundup posts, and expresses support for people working to draw attention to queer issues in Muslim communities, so her personal perspective on the issue is not entirely hidden. At the same time, she generally does not go out of her way to raise this issue on her own or to take an explicit stance on legal permissibility, aside from arguing that queer Muslims should not be excluded from Muslim communities.

Interestingly, in the one post where Kirstin addressed queer issues directly, she did not receive any hostile comments. But she did receive positive comments from three different women who identified as queer and Muslim, as well as from other Muslims who thanked her for posting about it, with members of the latter group varying from those who identified themselves unreservedly as allies to those who expressed some hesitations but still emphasised the importance of opposing homophobia above other considerations. It is curious, then, that the group of interlocutors Kirstin feared alienating seemed absent from that discussion on her blog, while the support she received from readers on the topic did not make her more inclined to continue her engagement with the topic. At the same time, given the number and tone of some of the comments Ify received, it is perhaps not hard to imagine why the topic would be seen as “risky” for someone like Kirstin, who does not have same personal commitment compelling her to discuss it.

Moments of productive incongruity

In my interviews, two of the bloggers referred to the dissonance many Muslims seem to feel when confronted with the possibility of a person being gay and Muslim, as if the two cannot happen at the same time. Ify noted that this dissonance was wrapped up with a number of other assumptions that people have made about her:

When I say things that don't jive, like I'm gay or something, that apparently doesn't go with the [conservative] talking points, or that I think... women should be able to speak, or like I think you can travel without a mahram, or that I don't think hijab is obligatory... people get really... they're like, but Ify, you're like the upholder of orthodoxy [laughter], and I'm like, no I'm not. No, I'm not. I just... wore an abaya and hijab and that makes me the upholder of orthodoxy?

Ify told me that she tries on her blog to “dispel the stereotype or the misconception that you can't be all of these things at once, like you can't be... gay or Muslim, gay or religious... empowered woman and Muslim.” Ify remarked that she is constantly being asked to clarify exactly what she means when she identifies herself as gay. When I asked her what seemed so confusing to those asking her for clarification, she suggested that the problem may lie in an unwillingness, rather than an inability, to understand her position:

I think [that what's not clear to them is] just that I'm gay. And like they know me. And I've been associated with... orthodoxy.... I just think like for them, it is such a conundrum for someone to be orthodox in orientation, religious orientation, somewhat orthodox, I don't know, maybe I'm a little less orthodox now. And to be gay, like it's just, it's, they just cannot understand it... Not that

they can't understand it, they don't accept it from *me*. Because they know me,
and so then it's even more like, oh no, we have to humanise people?

This, it must be emphasised, is Ify's own interpretation of the reactions and not a direct quote from any of those reacting. And yet it serves as a clear illustration of how Ify sees her place in telling her own stories about being a queer Muslim, and the humanising role that she hopes it will serve as a result, even when this is often met with resistance. In fact, if we return to Hamza Yusuf's comments cited earlier, where he talked about same-sex relationships as prohibited but also noted that "it is important to humanise people" (2010), Ify's comments here point to a level of humanising that may push beyond what Yusuf and others seem to suggest: by asking her interlocutors to recognise not only the existence of queer people in general, but the presence of queer members within their own communities. At another point in the interview, Ify expressed resentment at the often anonymous commenters who seem disappointed with her: "I get a lot of, 'Ify, I used to respect you so much, and now...' – I'm like, and now what, you don't respect me? ... That makes no sense to me, like you respect me like when I'm lying, hiding, and when I'm actually truthful, then it's like [I've] gone down somehow." At the same time, she also talked about a religious teacher who had previously said "really homophobic and disgusting things" but had become "much more respectful and careful in his word choice," a shift for which she felt she could take some credit because of her conversations with him. By making herself visible as a queer woman within "orthodox" spaces, Ify is demanding recognition for queer Muslims in ways that abstract theoretical discussions – in which queer people can remain hypothetical and presumed to be absent – may not.

For Shehnaz, it was realising that others saw contradictions in her identities that led her to question what it was that she had once seen as contradictory in other people. She told me in the interview:

I've been told I can't be a feminist because I'm Muslim, that's just Islam, right, and I've also been told that because I'm Pashtun I can't be a feminist, because feminism believes in, you know, choice, and Pashtun women by, according to Pashtunwali, we don't have choice, men make our choices... it's more complicated obviously, but generally, that's how men understand it, right?

She even related an experience of an online Pashtun community in which the (mainly male) participants did not know how to place her, and would discuss with each other – within a forum visible to Shehnaz as well – about whether she was really a Pashtun man posing as a woman, or whether she was a white Western woman posing as a Pashtun. As she explained, it took a male Pashtun friend she knew to vouch for her as a Pashtun woman in order for some of the men on the forum to let go of the issue, but even then they found it “shocking” that a Pashtun woman was expressing herself in such a way, and they “just didn't know how to respond.” So when it came to the question of being both queer and Muslim – identities that at one point she did see as incompatible – Shehnaz began to wonder if she was not suffering from the same lack of imagination as those who could not see her as a female Muslim Pashtun feminist; in fact, she described this as the main reason she began writing about queer issues. As she explained, “I started to relate to homosexuals, that okay, I'm constantly told that I can't have a certain identity just because of another identity, and so I was like, this – it just felt so wrong.” Being forced to confront perceptions

of incongruity in her online identity seems to have forced Shehnaz to think twice about how she was understanding others.

As she explains it, Shehnaz's experience became an analogy through which she could challenge her own thinking on other issues. In fact, it was her experiences writing about being a Pashtun woman online that informed the decisions she later took to write about queer issues online, another instance where multiple identities were present even when some would assume that such combinations of identifications could not exist simultaneously in one person. Shehnaz also used this analogy in relation to what her experience as a woman had led her to believe about dominant religious interpretations on gender issues. She explained that the discrimination that she felt as a woman, while not exactly the same as discrimination against queer people, highlighted the injustices inherent in certain interpretations about gender issues. Eventually, this led her to "[realise] that okay, humanity has been wrong about women and women's rights all this time, we can – we're probably also wrong about homosexuality."

A cartoon much cited in internet research on identity online depicts a dog sitting at a computer, with the caption "Nobody knows you're a dog on the Internet" (Everett, 2008, p. 5). The online environment supposedly allows for a kind of anonymity, and while it is possible (and necessary) to question the degree to which this anonymity or neutrality actually exists or is desirable, as was discussed in Chapter 1 (see pp. 63-67), it remains more or less true that the people one interacts with online only know what it is that one chooses to reveal about oneself (which may or may not correspond to a "true" offline identity). But what if you really *are* a dog, and you communicate this on the internet, only to have other readers and forum participants not believe you? These observations by both

Ify and Shehnaz point to another possible role of *tafsir* through blogging: the opportunity to claim combinations of identities that may be seen as impossible or incompatible. In doing so, the bloggers challenge notions that certain identifications necessarily exclude others, and work to expand perceptions of who can be Muslim, gay, female, Pashtun, feminist, or some combination of these. While telling these stories may have a direct role in informing one's own interpretation of religious principles, the act of narration can also play a less direct role, as seen here, in widening the imagined field of people and communities to whom these principles are relevant. As Ify notes, there may be a particularly humanising role for these stories. Those who may want to dismiss queer people as being somehow outside their community of committed, practising Muslims are forced to confront the notion that queer people also exist among those seen as conservative and orthodox. The flip side may apply as well; some members of queer communities who see religious people as inherently homophobic and rejecting of non-heterosexual orientations or identities will also have to adjust their perceptions in relation to the way Ify presents herself as a committed, practising Muslim. In both cases, this role of online writing does something even more basic than providing a narrative that feeds religious interpretation; it first establishes that the people for whom these religious and cultural questions are most directly pertinent really do exist, even within communities where their perspective may not have been assumed to be present.

While Shehnaz herself does not identify as queer and said in the interview that she did not know any queer Muslims, she incorporates her own experiences into a process of *tafsir* through blogging with regard to her evolving position on queer issues, as she considers the ways analogous experiences do inform her interpretations. This could

potentially be extended even further. As she told me, when explaining the evolution of her opinions on this topic, “basically there came a point in my life where everything I ever stood up for and believed was shattered into pieces.” Here, Shehnaz seems to be using a personal narrative to remind herself that seemingly incompatible identities may exist together, and that if she has come to believe that mainstream positions on the issues that *do* affect her are unjust and need to be challenged, she can extend that position to assume that “we’re probably also wrong” about other issues.

The limits of experience

In one post about being an ally to LGBT communities, Nahida writes,

My intention is *to be* an ally to the LGBT community, but as intentions are insignificant and a bit egotistical in the face of people feeling the excruciating suffocation of STOP PICTURING ME HAVING SEX AND THEN DECIDING MY RIGHTS ACCORDINGLY GODDAMIT, it is for LGBT people to decide whether my actions are helpful or hurtful in their effort of liberation from the weirdly sex-obsessed tyranny of people like me. There have been and are too many instances of a straight “ally” saying / doing totally offensive crap and then talking about how it’s okay because of ally-ness and so they actually support LGBT people and thus can get away with saying / doing totally offensive crap. Well guess what, straight person! You’re not an ally if an LGBT person says you’re not an ally because you’re not behaving like one. (the fatal feminist, 23 May 2013)

Nahida points out what has been raised already in this section with regard to a focus within Muslim discourses on the permissibility (or lack thereof) of particular sexual acts between particular partners, a topic clearly relevant to, but in no way synonymous with, what it means to be a queer Muslim. On the one hand, Nahida imagines herself in this passage in the place of a queer Muslim, a position that she describes as one of “excruciating suffocation” as “rights” are decided only according to assumptions about which sexual activities are taking place. At the same time, Nahida explicitly disavows a certain level of experience and authority on this issue, specifically because of her own location. Despite her brief projection of herself into the experiences of queer Muslims, Nahida ultimately concludes that, because this is not her own experience, she (like other straight people) cannot be considered an expert on what it is like to be queer or who qualifies as a straight ally, and that she should therefore defer to those who do have direct personal experience. This assertion is significant for what it establishes about the importance Nahida places on experience as a privileged source of knowledge. In this context, Nahida’s use of her own experience elsewhere on the blog may take on additional importance, given what she appears to be saying about the authority that experience holds in processes of knowing and interpreting ideas in community.

This privileging of experience also raises some important questions, especially as we consider experience in relation what it means to speak on behalf of a particular group or identity. Is every person who identifies as being somewhere in the LGBTQ spectrum equally qualified to evaluate the exact degree to which outsiders can be considered allies? What happens when different LGBTQ people might disagree on the issue? What about situations where a queer person expresses an opinion on queer issues that Nahida might

view as ethically or politically problematic? Is there any room left for her to disagree, even while acknowledging her own distance from the topic? How many LGBTQ people need to affirm someone's status as an ally in order for it to be considered legitimate?

The questions I pose above should also point us to the limits of holding experience as the only, or the primary, source of knowledge about the situation of a larger group of people, and the dangers of essentialism inherent in such moves. As noted in Chapter 2, Joan W. Scott (1991) has criticised appeals to experience because of how they often conceal the historical processes involved in constituting the standpoint from which experience is being articulated. In this case, Nahida's emphasis on LGBT experiences as taking precedence over other forms of knowledge, while an important act in many ways, reifies the category of "LGBT" as if there is something essential to it, as if one could leave aside the heteropatriarchal histories through which the category has come to exist as an identity at all. As numerous feminist scholars have pointed out, assuming one common experience for a group ignores the presence of multiple intersectional and interlocking forms of oppression that are always simultaneously present (Razack, 2005; Mohanty, 2003). With regard to the experiences of menstruation discussed in Chapter 3, we might also wonder how discourses that paint menstruation as deviant, dirty, or impure might act differently on transgender bodies that do not fit into binary expectations about who does or does not menstruate, or on bodies that do not menstruate for whatever medical reasons, or on bodies read as fat, sick, or disabled, and therefore already seen as deviant. In other words, to speak publicly about menstruation as a small and conventionally feminine cisgender woman may carry much less risk and look very different from a speaker who discusses menstruation from a transgender or disabled perspective.

A focus on experience as the primary source of knowledge about a group also has limitations when topics relevant to marginalised communities are discussed less frequently, because of the lack of people with direct personal experience. If the concerns raised by Nahida above about the dangers of claiming allyship, for example, resulted in fewer straight people speaking about queer issues out of a fear of being seen as inappropriately claiming to be allies, this could serve to further marginalise these issues, just as problematic self-proclaimed allies can. We might also return to Kirstin's decision not to write about queer issues more often because of being "risk-averse" and worried about "backlash" and losing readers and credibility. Of course, each blogger has to make decisions about which topics to discuss on her blog, and it would be impossible for any person to adequately cover every single issue that may hold interest or importance for her. Kirstin even acknowledged to me that she was "also missing out on another... demographic within the blogosphere, who aren't reading" her blog because it is not an explicitly queer-affirming space. But there is nonetheless a certain privilege to be found in feeling enough distance from a certain issue to decide not to engage with it at length because it is too "risky." This is especially noteworthy when we take into account the controversial issues that Kirstin *has* raised, in some cases repeatedly, on her blog, such as women's spaces in mosques, breastfeeding in public spaces, and discourses around menstruation, indicating that there are certain topics that compel her to take the kinds of risks that she is unwilling to take with topics like queerness.

The contrast between Ify's and Kirstin's decisions on what to post on this topic points to some of the potential dangers that arise in excessively prioritising the role of experience within religious interpretive processes. Romanticising the role and importance

of experience runs the risk of marginalising the experiences of minoritised groups (and of minorities within groups that are already marginalised), as those in the majority, for whom the stakes are less high and less personal, always hold the privilege of opting out of conversations that may seem too messy or complicated, without facing serious personal repercussions. It is inevitable that experiences shape how bloggers – and others – come to think and write about religious principles, whether consciously or not. Nonetheless, focusing too narrowly on experience alone as the key to transforming understandings and interpretations of certain issues may mean continuing to marginalise smaller or less powerful communities whose experiences may not be shared by many who are writing, and may let writers “off the hook” from having to engage with issues with which they do not have direct personal experience. Taking as an example Kirstin’s reticence to engage directly with some of the more pointed questions of permissibility, we can question whether she herself would accept that same level of reticence from a man who decided not to weigh in on debates about women’s prayer spaces because the topic seemed too charged or “risky.”⁵³ Personal experiences and narratives thereof remain integral to the process of *tafsir* through blogging, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, but the preceding examples make it clear that it is essential to ask whether and how individual experience gets taken as representative of a group, and what are the responsibilities of allies to look beyond their own stories.

⁵³ For example, in a post about whether Islam needs Muslim feminists, Kirstin writes that “very few Islamic scholars” seem willing to address religiously-justified misogyny, and when they do try to do so, “it’s couched in politically safe language” (wood turtle, 12 January 2012).

Finding comfort in uncertainty through the medium of blogging

In one of her posts, Ify quotes a Jewish scholar who advocates, on one hand, that communities acknowledge and accept queer members, and on the other, that queer congregants recognise the limits of how far their religious communities will go in actively supporting queer issues (Okoye, 14 February 2014). While she seems to accept these limits at the community level, she is clear in other posts that her personal commitment to Islam remains strong. In one, she writes, "I'm okay saying to Allah as I bow down that I am here at your service, turning to you. I don't always understand everything perfectly, but I ask you for help in everything" (1 April 2013). In another post, advising a young woman who writes about being attracted to other girls and worrying about losing her faith, Ify tells her:

As for fearing for the loss of your religion and faith, hold on to it, in whatever way possible.... One tragedy of the harmful discourse around lgbt issues in our community is that queerness is often placed in opposition to faith.... I am queer and Muslim. How that plays out in my life may be different from how it will work for you or for someone else. If Islam is universal, as is often claimed, then it must be for everyone including you and me. (14 November 2014)

As noted earlier, Ify appeals to the universality of Islam for answers on this issue, and to her own knowledge as a woman who understands herself to be both gay and Muslim. The other blogs raise similar points. Shehnaz notes that instead of queer sexualities being a problem, "The real disease is our intolerance, our narrow interpretation and practice of Islam that we refuse to believe can be interpreted and practiced in multiple ways--because God is greater than our limited understanding--and our ignorance" (Orbala, 21 December

2013). Kirstin writes that “no one has the right to assume that a person isn’t worthy of God’s love” (wood turtle, 7 October 2010). Although Nahida appears to spend a bit more time re-reading religious texts to derive new rulings (the fatal feminist, 28 May 2011), the general trend among the bloggers seems to be that textual and legal interpretations should take a backseat to what they see as larger principles of equality and compassion.

Writing about the possible limitations of feminist readings of the Qur’an, Hidayatullah (2014) proposes that Muslim feminists embrace a position of “radical uncertainty” (p. 193), not as a place of weakness or defensiveness but rather as a platform from which to develop new and creative strategies for reconciling feminist principles of gender equality with Islamic scripture. This position of uncertainty seems to inform the bloggers in this study as well, as they acknowledge the importance of scripture and other canonical texts, while occasionally sidestepping these in favour of opinions rooted in the value of gender equality and the affirmation of sexual diversity. And while some commenters may accuse the bloggers of therefore appearing less committed to Islam, the bloggers root their uncertainty within a framework that invokes Islam as central. Some of the writers’ posts on this issue, or Ify’s repeated refusal to “justify” her own queerness in relation to Qur’an or *hadith*, could have suggested some level of confusion regarding how to reconcile advocating against homophobia within a religious framework that has historically condemned sexual acts between two people of the same sex (and, at best, has been silent when it comes to explicitly affirming support for queer people). Instead of writing about confusion as a negative feeling, however, Shehnaz explains that “God is greater than our limited understanding” – that she sees the fact that the situation may seem contradictory or incomprehensible as confirmation of God’s ability to encompass more

than humans can understand (Orbala, 21 December 2013). This is, of course, a longstanding practice within Islamic legal reasoning, with scholars traditionally ending their legal opinions with “*Allahu a’lam*”, or “God knows best” (Quraishi, 2008, p. 166). Still, it represents a contrast with some of the work within Islamic feminist scholarship that Hidayatullah describes, which seems focused on pointing to answers within Islamic texts rather than opening up questions that may not have clear answers. By framing uncertainty and even potential contradictions as examples of God’s expansiveness and unknowability, and of Islam’s universality, these bloggers claim theological backing for the ideas they discuss. In doing so, they position themselves within a religious framework of interpretation, but one that might look different from the standard to which some of their readers try to hold them.

The practice of blogging plays a unique role here. As a platform through which writers share personal stories and incorporate narratives of experience, blogging becomes a natural starting point from which to point to contradictions, gaps, and tensions in how the topics in question are often discussed. Moreover, as a writing framework that is both episodic (where posts are usually published independently of one another) and open-ended (not requiring a particular narrative arc that links posts together in anticipation of an eventual conclusion that ties all of the parts together), blogging allows for writers to think “out loud” and share ideas without feeling like these have to be building towards one coherent conclusion or even necessarily consistent with each other. With the blog archive usually remaining available online, readers have access to a range of positions the blogger has held, allowing them to track the development of the writer’s thoughts and the different paths they have attempted in thinking through their questions. I noted in Chapter 1 that

blogs are publicly accessible but, as Harris (2003) suggests, often occupy spaces on the margins, sometimes deliberately so, and thus can resemble counterpublic spaces. This ambiguous position of personal blogs as alternative media in relation to the public sphere, along with the fact that blogs are self-published without an outside editor, may also make it easier to be open about contradictions and uncertainties without always having to feel accountable to a particular standard or audience.

Conclusion

To be clear, there is nothing new in the existence of people who follow some religious tenets while disagreeing with others, or who identify with a religion without being especially concerned about how precisely they are following the rules or using religious texts to justify their actions. At the same time, Hidayatullah (2014) has emphasised that Muslim feminism as it has developed in the West in recent decades has had a particular interest in decisively rooting its ideals of gender equality within the Qur'an as well as other text-based traditions. It is within this trajectory that Hidayatullah proposes a shift whereby Muslim feminists confront the limitations of certain texts as sources for authoritatively establishing principles of gender equality and sexual diversity, looking instead for other avenues through which to reconcile some of these concepts, and taking comfort in the uncertainty that she describes.

The bloggers in this study express an investment in many of the same texts and traditions that Hidayatullah describes. It is for this reason that I argue that the position of comfort in uncertainty at which they have arrived is significant, as it illustrates one way in which Muslim feminists may be taking up the challenge that Hidayatullah outlines (even if

this is not directly in response to Hidayatullah's own writing, given that her book was published after the vast majority of blog posts studied here were written). As they discuss both menstruation and queer issues, the bloggers confront a range of religious discourses, and they write openly about some of the impacts that such discourses can have. While in some contexts they use citations from the Qur'an and *hadith* to support their positions, they do not appear to feel obligated to do so in order to claim a place for themselves within Islam.

As was discussed in this chapter and the previous one, the topics of menstruation and queer issues as they arise on these four Muslim feminist blogs share many characteristics. In particular, they challenge conventions around which issues should or should not be discussed publicly, while negotiating tensions with the impact that particular religious discourses and rulings can have. At the same time, there are also notable differences between how the two topics are addressed. For example, although Nahida talks about social pressures to keep menstruation hidden, and Kirstin receives a comment that her post on menstruation is "obscene," menstruation itself as a bodily function is obviously not forbidden, and thus any negative responses to the act of writing publicly on the topic, especially when the question of whether praying on one's period is allowed is left open, relate more to questions of manners and propriety than to legal discourses. In some ways, the reverse is true with regard to queer issues, where the public writing about it is seen as having negative implications from a legalistic point of view. In Ify's case, as we have seen, she uses principles concerning manners and virtuous behaviour (especially through values such as honesty, integrity, and trusting in God) to justify her decision to write about the topic anyway. The two topics are approached differently as well when it comes to how to

engage with the legal rulings. Nahida and Kirstin do engage with and even follow certain rulings around menstruation to some degree (based on when they do refrain from praying or from wearing nail polish), even as they argue that the stated rulings do not respond to all of their concerns as women whose bodies are portrayed as dirty. When it comes to queer issues, Ify generally refuses to enter into legal debates at all, aside from an acknowledgement that legal discourses only relate to a small part of what it might mean to be queer, and on that basis she repeatedly refuses to “justify” herself. Each of the other bloggers takes a similar approach to queer issues; Kirstin acknowledges the dominant position but stops short of endorsing it. For her part, Shehnaz spends much more time looking at what is missing when queer issues and queer Muslims are ignored than at what is present in the discourses that exclude them. Nahida is the only one of the four to explicitly argue for a textual justification for queer relationships.

In writing about these two topics on their blogs, Ify, Nahida, Shehnaz and Kirstin engage in *tafsir* through blogging as they develop – and then put into practice – interpretations of Islamic principles based on Qur’an, *hadith*, earlier jurisprudential work, lived experience, analogies, feminist ethics, and other factors. In engaging with these multiple dimensions through their writing, the bloggers disrupt ideas about what can be publicly discussed, exposing the negative impact that certain discourses can have and developing alternative ways of engaging with and weaving together Islamic and feminist values.

Chapter 5: Blogging and Gendered Spaces

In February 2012, Kirstin S. Dane published a blog post on wood turtle about a mosque that seems to have everything. The imam is animated and funny. The men's and women's sections are side by side, allowing families to sit together in the middle, with segregated sections at the back for those who prefer it. Kirstin writes that “This mosque is particularly good at making sure that people can pray wherever they feel comfortable.” The post describes the mosque's soup kitchen, community garden, babysitting services, counselling services, and library. It is accessible to people with disabilities, and is constructed in an environmentally sustainable way. The mosque's board includes “an equal number of men and women”; it hosts lectures on “Living with HIV” as well as drug abuse and racism; and it offers “registered chaplaincy courses for *anyone* interested in becoming an imam” – both men and women. It is a space where Kirstin and her family feel at home and “an example of what is possible when women and equity allies are given a platform to actualise their opinions and affirm their rights in Islam” (wood turtle, 2 February 2012).

The catch? Halfway through the post, Kirstin refers to her daughter Eryn as a teenager, signalling – especially to regular readers, who know that Eryn was only a toddler at the time Kirstin wrote the post – that she is not describing a real mosque but rather projecting herself into the future, illustrating her vision of what an ideal mosque would look like.

The post received 28 comments, many from readers who were captivated by the space described in the post and disappointed to learn that this mosque does not actually exist. The first comment begins, “In my mind I was thinking, I want to move where you live

and go to this mosque too! It's like a fantasy land! Then I came to the part where Eryn was a teenager... nooooo it IS a fantasy land!" (qatheworld, 2 February 2012). More than one commenter talks about being brought to tears by the post, reflecting its high level of emotional resonance, and perhaps also the collective frustration felt by many readers with the actual state of their local mosques. One reader notes the importance of providing sign language interpretation in order for this imagined mosque to be considered truly accessible, adding her voice to further expand its possibilities. Others talk about positive mosque experiences that approach the mosque described in the post, mentioning prayer spaces run by the El-Tawhid Juma Circle in Toronto and Muslims for Progressive Values in the United States, as well as full-fledged physical mosques in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa.

This post, and the discussion that arose in response to it, raises a number of questions. How do online spaces such as blogs serve as forums for collective translocal public discussions about local physical spaces? How are these discussions affected by the fact that most of their participants do not share, and have never shared, the same physical space with one another? What role might online spaces play in providing alternate sources of community for those who describe themselves as "unmosqued"?⁵⁴ What is gained and lost through these collective processes of imagining new kinds of local spaces? What is the relevance of the particular format of the personal blog, and the personal narratives and photographs contained therein, in the shaping of spaces and communities online? If online

⁵⁴ On these blogs and elsewhere, the term "unmosqued" tends to be used as a general catch-all label for people who do not regularly visit mosques. A discussion on Kirstin's blog, however, demonstrates that this may mean a range of things depending on the individual: for some, it might indicate an active decision not to attend mosque services; for others, it might be an issue of practicality, where they would go to a mosque if they could but are prevented from doing so because of schedules or geography.

discussions are being influenced by experiences in local spaces, how might these discussions in turn influence physical spaces in participants' local communities? Lastly, situating this discussion within a framework of *tafsir* through blogging, we might ask: how does the sharing of personal narratives and religious interpretations within public conversations on blogs shape spaces and communities, both online and offline?

Blogs as online (counter)public spaces

Much of this chapter focuses on notions of space, namely online spaces and gendered spaces in mosques. Doreen Massey (1984) identifies several components that make up "the spatial," including distance, movement, "a sense of *place*" – defined as "a commitment to location and to established community" – and a sense of symbolism (pp. 5-6). As Kirsten Simonsen (1996) writes, "the spatial forms an integrated part of social practices and/or social processes – and... such practices and processes are all situated in space (and time) and all inherently involve a spatial dimension" (p. 502). In other words, rather than having a neutral or objective existence, spaces are socially determined and time-bound, qualities that apply both to local spaces and to translocal spaces on the internet. In turn, these spaces shape the social interactions and practices that happen within them, as will be illustrated in numerous ways through the chapter.

Mia Lövhelm (2011b) writes about young women's blogs as ethical spaces, which she defines as "spaces where reflections and negotiations on ethical issues are evoked in a more general sense" (p. 340), a description that in fact echoes Habermas' conception of the public sphere. Blogs serve in this understanding both as platforms where particular content and perspectives are shared and as spaces of encounter, where ethical

deliberations take place at least in part through the interactions among bloggers and audiences. In examining young women's blogs, Lövheim writes that "the bloggers, through their postings, make their personal experiences and opinions into objects for reflections on ethical issues concerning the values and norms forming young women's lives" (p. 349). She observes three strategies in particular: first, that bloggers invite readers to respond – sometimes "confession"-style – to particular topics; second, blog writers "make a statement" about a particular issue; and third, the sharing of personal experiences with regard to the topic, which can build a sense of "intimacy" between bloggers and readers (p. 349). Lövheim argues that, through these strategies, blogs "become not only a space for private self-expression and reflection but also for collective negotiations of social norms and meanings" (p. 350). As will be seen in this chapter, these negotiations occur both within a larger public sphere and within conversations that reflect more of a counterpublic orientation.

Lövheim's insights here relate to a broad social and cultural context in which the ethical deliberations taking place are not necessarily framed as pertaining to any particular religious tradition. Still, her observations are applicable within a more directly religious – and in this case, Muslim – context as well. As will be illustrated more concretely later in this chapter, the bloggers in this study employ similar strategies in their writing on Islamic norms and ethics, and their public sharing of ideas and experiences helps build a blogging environment in which ethical issues are collectively debated. The invitations to readers to contribute their perspectives, as described in Lövheim's first strategy, are often less explicitly apparent in the blogs examined here than in the case of those blogs Lövheim observed. But the heavy presence of personal narratives in the comment sections of many

of the blog posts suggests that many readers nonetheless feel themselves personally interpellated and respond accordingly with their own testimonials, co-creating ethical spaces on the blogs.

The emphasis on this chapter is on the public and collective dimensions of *tafsir* through blogging as it appears on the four blogs. As discussed in Chapter 1, online blog spaces intersect with notions of the public sphere in diverse ways. On the one hand, most blogs are publicly accessible, and anybody with access to the internet (and to the language of the blog) can read or comment on them. On the other hand, many blogs function as a kind of counterpublic, as a space that is deliberately separate from mainstream discourses and that often attempts to develop and support alternate perspectives from those that dominate. In this way, blogs echo the community-building dimensions of many alternative media projects (Waltz, 2005; Rodriguez, 2001). Looking at how the bloggers attempt to establish their authority to share their religious interpretations in the public sphere, encourage readers to take action in their local and online communities, and use their blogs to host conversations among those who feel excluded from mainstream community discussions, this chapter considers both the public and counterpublic dimensions of blog spaces.

Islam, blogging, and community

In her writing about Muslim communities in the United States, Juliane Hammer (2012) argues for broadening the definition of “community” beyond its conventional association with “traditional” or mainstream institutions:

If our understanding of Muslim communities and their boundaries is limited to groups of American Muslims who are associated with the same mosque or community centers, or those affiliated with Muslim institutions and organizations, we as scholars tend to erase the presence of those who are not involved in these kinds of communities. It makes sense, then, to push the boundaries of communities to include virtual networks, informal groups (including women-led prayer congregations that meet in private spaces), and temporary formations of community such as those associated with the 2005 prayer [the public mixed-gender Friday prayer led by Amina Wadud]. (p. 122)

As was noted in Chapter 1, I use the word “community” to refer to an active, committed, and (to some degree) sustained engagement within a collective online. This often overlaps significantly with the notion of a counterpublic; in this dissertation, the term “community” is usually used to highlight an internal orientation and commitment within a collective that may also exist as a counterpublic. Hammer’s quote further reminds us that understanding Muslim communities online, including communities formed around the blogs explored in this study, requires an acknowledgement that such communities may not directly reflect dominant historical conceptions of what communities look like.⁵⁵ In Chapter 1, I discussed the blurriness of the distinction between online and offline when it comes to religious activities and the internet (see Campbell, 2012). The use of blogs to talk about tangible physical spaces makes it clear that the online world is not entirely separate from the

⁵⁵ It should also be noted that, even if my focus in this chapter is largely on religious communities online, none of the communities formed in response to the specific blogs mentioned in this study is exclusively Muslim. Each of the bloggers has readers and active commenters who follow their work out of shared experiences of culture, motherhood, feminism, or other similarities, or simply because they seem to be reading the blog to learn more about the life of someone different from them.

(supposedly) offline world, nor does its advent make the realm of the offline irrelevant or redundant. Blog posts do not simply reflect a unidirectional flow from offline (experiences in a mosque) to online (narratives thereof); they also reflect a reverse flow in which online discussions attempt to influence or reimagine physical offline spaces. While these online discussions may refer to some spaces that are wholly physical, such as brick-and-mortar mosques, and others that appear entirely online, such as a particular blog post and comment space, the two continuously bleed into one another.

These loose boundaries mean that the language used to attempt to conceptualise online spaces (and their relationship to other kinds of spaces) is often imprecise. While I do continue to use “offline” and “online” throughout this dissertation, I do so with an acknowledgement that these terms should be understood as being in conversation with each other, and not as opposites. At times, especially in this chapter, I emphasise the “physical” nature of particular spaces, such as mosques. While this is often a relevant descriptor – especially as it characterises a specific dimension of Muslim women’s exclusion from religious spaces, along with the symbolic and discursive exclusions also discussed in this dissertation – it should not erase the fact that even online spaces are ultimately reliant on physical components of electricity, fibre optic cables, and so on to exist. Elsewhere, I use language of “local” spaces in contrast to “translocal” ones, which exhibit a more neutral relationship to the role of the internet. This chapter investigates the ways online discussions about mosque spaces illustrate the blurriness of the supposed online/offline divide, suggesting more complicated ways that these two realms relate to and produce each other. It also looks at the ways that personal narratives and interpretations become interwoven with collective conversations, and about how

conversations about shared experiences of space play a role in cultivating communities and ethical spaces (Lövheim, 2011b) online.

Of course, it is not only with the internet that conventional conceptions of religious space and activities have been challenged. Jeremy Stolow (2010) points out that “religion can no longer (indeed never could) be contained within the confines of traditional social logics of institutional loyalty, the performative demands of face-to-face interaction, the controlled circulation of sacred texts, or the localized boundaries of ritual time” (p. 3). Stolow’s words here, on the one hand, point to the role media play in challenging institutional authority and certain conceptions of time, place, and presence, while on the other hand emphasising that these supposedly “traditional” institutions and conceptions have never been entirely stable.

These ongoing shifts in conceptions of religion and religious authority can bring both advantages and disadvantages to religious practitioners. While Stephen D. O’Leary (2004) affirms that the lack of physical presence when it comes to religious activities on the internet can mean losing some components of religious rituals, he also notes the importance of asking what is gained when religious practices are brought online (p. 47). As will be seen in more detail later in this chapter, this latter question is particularly pertinent for the bloggers in this study, as well as many of their readers. A number of them lament the lack of physical space in which they could feel comfortable performing Islamic rituals or attending religious gatherings, a need that is fulfilled neither by existing local institutions nor by attempts to engage in religious discussions in the virtual space of blogs. Still, even if there are certain rituals or events that may be only possible (or meaningful to the bloggers) in particular physical spaces, it is also important to keep in mind that the flip side is also

true: there are other conversations and communities that would not come into being as easily, if at all, except through the internet. It should be noted here that my focus on personal blogs – which involve asynchronous posts usually focused primarily on written texts of variable lengths – represents only one dimension of online religious engagement, although some other examples, such as livestreaming of religious services and conferences, are discussed at the end of this chapter (see pp. 305-308).

Muslim worship and pilgrimage online

In order to consider in more detail the relationships between online communication practices and physical mosque spaces, it is instructive to look at similar relationships between virtual and physical spaces that arise in other research. Here, I will look briefly at research about the *hajj* pilgrimage online, and at the role of online media and diasporic identity.

I have written previously about Canadian journalist Muhammad Lila, who went on the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca in 2010 (Riley, 2012). Through a partnership with the *Toronto Star*, as well as extensive use of Facebook and Twitter, Lila shared updates and reflections from his trip in real time, as he continuously posted tweets, photos, and blog posts. In so doing, Lila brought his readers to Mecca with him, and made himself present with readers around the world. This was done not only through the sharing of visual images and descriptions of his location, but also through interactions that reflected a shared sense of the landscape with those who had previously visited but were not there that year, as well as through a shared celebration with Muslim readers observing Eid rituals around the world after the *hajj* ended. Lila's physical movements through the pilgrimage were marked

by his online silences as well, most notably in the moments when he went to the Kaaba and, following both the official rules and his own personal sensibilities, left his Blackberry and camera behind. Through his use of mobile, online, and social media forms, Lila was able to convey the time and space of the pilgrimage in innovative ways (Riley, 2012). In other cases, users of the virtual world website *Second Life* have created opportunities for participants to go on a virtual *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca; avatars on the site can wear traditional pilgrimage clothing and partake virtually in the main pilgrimage rituals (Hill-Smith, 2011; Schlosser, 2013). This phenomenon also points to some of the elements of online religious activities that challenge conventional ways of thinking about the boundaries defining spaces and rituals. For example, while participants can take part in the virtual pilgrimage from anywhere in the world, rather than having to make the physical journey to Saudi Arabia, the virtual journey is still one that is made *to* Mecca; the geographic setting still maintains major relevance.

Again, O’Leary’s (2004) question about “what ritual *gains* in the virtual environment” (p. 47) is key. It is undeniable that, for many who have done the *hajj* or hope to do so eventually, physically standing before the Kaaba and taking part in other *hajj* rituals with millions of others is not an experience that can be replicated in front of a computer screen. For others, however, physically going on *hajj* is not an option, whether for financial reasons, because they are not Muslim, or because they have limited options as women traveling to Saudi Arabia. In such cases, the question is not one of replacing a trip that they could otherwise be experiencing, but rather of bringing them into a ritual (even if only partially) that would otherwise be entirely denied to them. There can also be advantages to a virtual *hajj* in terms of physical safety and avoiding large crowds. On the

other hand, the Second Life *haji* can also have harmful effects, as it has also found itself “mobbed” more than once by Islamophobic participants who used the event to insult Muslims (Hill-Smith, 2011, p. 243).

Even the question of whether the virtual pilgrimage counts as a “real” *haji* is perhaps less clear-cut than it may seem. On the one hand, it is difficult to find any opinions from the field of Islamic jurisprudence that would give the same legal validity to a pilgrimage that had been performed without physical presence in Mecca. In fact, the creators of the Second Life *haji* have themselves published a legal opinion online making it clear that, in their view Muslims cannot fulfill the religiously obligatory pilgrimage by replacing the physical journey to Mecca with a pilgrimage on Second Life (Schlosser, 2013, p. 43). On the other hand, legal validity is not the only way the value of a pilgrimage can be measured. It is conceivable that a Second Life pilgrimage conducted with sincerity and focus could have a greater spiritual impact than a pilgrimage that consists only of outward bodily actions and geographic movements, even if the former does not officially “count” as a *haji*. At the same time, some participants in online pilgrimages may see the journey as simply an interesting activity, as something fun or educational without necessarily having much spiritual significance (MacWilliams, 2004, p. 225), and so the potential spiritual or religious weight of a virtual pilgrimage should not be assumed to be universally present.

In fact, the notion of a virtual pilgrimage is not even a new idea or one specifically linked to the internet. It is only within the last century that the *haji* has become accessible for a significant part of the world’s Muslim population. The difficulty and time involved in carrying out the pilgrimage before the advent of cars and airplanes meant that, for most of Islamic history, Mecca was made available to most Muslims through the travel accounts of

those who had managed to go (see Wolfe, 1997). There is also a long tradition of writing about the mystical side of the *hajj*. For example, it is said about Rabia of Basra that the Kaaba came to her, and that she ultimately transcended the need for the pilgrimage entirely, so focused was she on seeking that Kaaba's Creator (Badawi, 2014). As Alan Morinis argues, it can sometimes be "questionable to distinguish between terrestrial and 'metaphorical' pilgrimages" (quoted in MacWilliams, 2004, p. 224). To see pilgrimage as a purely physical movement, in other words, distracts from the ways that all pilgrimages involve elements of meaning-making, whether or not they involve a physical journey. The reconfigurations of space and ritual that arise through the phenomenon of online pilgrimages underline the ways discussions about religious spaces and practices on the internet can be seen both as shaped by offline precedents and as giving new shapes and forms of access to the spaces that participants inhabit, on- and offline. Similar issues arise in the discussions about mosque spaces and religious communities that form the focus of this chapter.

Online communities and diaspora

The field of research on diasporic media provides another fruitful lens through which to consider how space, place, and community come together online. Peter Mandaville (2003) writes that such research should seek "to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined" (p. 135). Strictly speaking, Muslims may not ordinarily be considered a diaspora by conventional definitions, which for their part typically rely on a shared ethnic heritage and sense of exile from a

singular homeland (Brubaker, 2005). Still, some researchers suggest that global Muslim communities share other traits with more traditionally-defined diasporic groups, such as their disruption of the coherence of the nation-state as a primary source of identification (Sayyid, 2000) or the sense of shared culture across national borders, as may be the case in global diasporic Arab or South Asian communities. Research on diasporic media can thus bring some important insights into how space and community can be shaped through media participation in the context of Muslim women's blogs. In line with Mandaville's comments above, such research can help us to uncover the processes through which communal identities and spaces can be (re)negotiated through media.

Myria Georgiou (2006) also notes that the imagined transnational community of a diaspora pre-exists the mediated interactions in which members of that community then engage, unlike other communities founded according to specific interests (p. 35), a phenomenon that might have resonance, for example, with notions of a global Muslim *ummah* (community). Georgiou further explains that, within diasporic (and, indeed, many other) communities, members may belong to a number of communities simultaneously, and "belonging is achieved, strengthened and renewed through mediated communication," even as members may also engage with one another in person as well (p. 21). She writes that diasporic communities are characterised by three primary components: "co-presence," a notion that encompasses physical presence as well as presence mediated through communications technologies; "memory," which serves to construct a communal history and identity; and "future outlook," or a way of looking ahead to continue to reproduce the community (p. 51).

Theorised at length by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), the concepts of deterritorialisation and (especially) reterritorialisation have been used by a number of scholars of diasporic media to describe the cultivation of cultural practices in a new geographical home. Karim H. Karim (2003), for instance, writes that for members of a diaspora, “electronic media reterritorialise the diaspora through the resonance of electromagnetic frequencies” (p. 10), by bringing languages and rituals into new spaces. Ella Shohat (1998) similarly refers to the potential for the internet to play a role in reterritorialisation and, by extension, in allowing those living in diaspora to “overcome the estrangement of displacement” (p. 227) by connecting with others who share their histories and experiences. In fact, this language hints at another reason that the language of diaspora may be relevant to the situation of the bloggers studied in this dissertation. While these women (and their readers) engaging in online discussions about religious spaces and communities may not share an experience of exile from a particular geographic location, they do talk frequently about shared experiences of exile and alienation from their religious institutions and physical mosque spaces. It is therefore instructive to observe the many overlaps that exist between the functions of diasporic media and the role of the blogs studied in this dissertation.

The idea of “reterritorialisation” comes through in the ways that bloggers and commenters create and claim spaces online when their local physical spaces feel inadequate, as will be explored at length in this chapter. The emotional support found through online communities seems to play a role, at least for some participants, in “[overcoming] the estrangement of displacement,” to use Shohat’s phrase. Daniel Martin Varisco (2010) has observed that the use of the internet, and blogs in particular, for the

purposes of developing a sense of community and connection to others with similar experiences is especially strong for those living in areas where they are relatively isolated as Muslims (p. 173). Similarly, Anna Piela's (2012) research on Muslim women participants in online discussion groups found that the most active participants were often those who did not have a large local Muslim community, and that being active in online discussions made them feel less isolated (p. 32). Thus, for Muslim women who may find themselves positioned as foreigners not only within the national context in which they live but also within the mainstream Muslim communities of their local areas of residence, blogs may indeed play a number of roles similar to those of diasporic media: building community with others who also have had to leave their place of belonging; holding conversations about shared experiences of having to leave community spaces; and finding a sense of home through the shared sense of exile or shared imaginings of what a return to community might look like.

Soon after migrating from the Blogger server over to Wordpress, Shehnaz published a post in which she compared this virtual migration across blogging software platforms to her experiences of physical migration to a new country. She writes,

So far, I'm not feeling at home here at WordPress. I suppose that's because home will always be home and nothing can replace the one place that helped make us what we are (although, honestly, my homeland, Swat, where I was born and raised half of my life, doesn't feel like home to me ... at least these days). I feel like I'm an immigrant all over again, but this time in a virtual space. (Orbala, 31 October 2014)

She notes the strangeness she feels as she navigates a new space. While she knows that her sense of foreignness is “temporary” and a “sacrifice” that is worthwhile for the sake of the blog to become more accessible to readers, she explains that the feeling of strangeness is still strong enough to “almost [make her] unexcited about blogging.” Shehnaz’s words here might seem dramatic, but they also highlight the role blogging has in her life, as something so natural and intrinsic to her regular practices that a change in the writing platform feels deeply destabilising. I raise this point here specifically to highlight the ways that movement through online spaces seems to be linked to experiences of movement through offline spaces, and to highlight the links that this comparison suggests between online and offline worlds. For Shehnaz, both instances of movement are inflected with a desire to find a place where she belongs.

Background on women’s mosque spaces

The issue of mosque spaces in North America (and elsewhere), particularly with regard to gender, has received increasing attention in recent years, both within and outside of Muslim communities. As was discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, the mixed-gender Friday prayer led by Amina Wadud in 2005 served to spark a host of conversations about gender in Muslim religious spaces (Hammer, 2012). Zarqa Nawaz’s 2005 documentary *Me and the Mosque* focuses largely on gender issues and women’s spaces within mosques, documenting the increased presence of barriers between men’s and women’s sections, and its impact on women’s participation in religious spaces. Nawaz argues that this trend toward segregation is partly due to the influence of foreign imams

and funding, and that mosques in North America need to be more relevant and responsive to the local cultural context (MacDonald & Nawaz, 2005).

Several relatively mainstream Islamic organisations in North America have also begun to position themselves more strongly in favour of rethinking the mosque spaces allocated to women. A booklet jointly compiled by the Canada-based Islamic Social Service Associations and the United States-based organisation Women in Islam, Inc., and supported by six other umbrella organisations representing Muslims in both countries, was published in 2005. The booklet, entitled “Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage,” emphasises the importance of making mosques open and accessible to all, particularly in a North American context where Muslims are in the minority (Islamic Social Services Associations & Women in Islam, Inc., 2005). It notes that a number of institutions fall far short of this goal, observing that “many mosques relegate women to small, dingy, secluded, airless and segregated quarters,” and some do not allow women at all. It further notes that women find themselves barred from leadership roles at the mosque and that the situation is therefore “unjust and degrading” (p. 5). It also reports a survey conducted of 416 mosques in the United States, of which 31% “still prevent women from serving on their executive boards.” The survey also found that, in 2000, 66% of mosques had the women’s section in another room or separated from the men’s section by a partition, a proportion that had increased from 52% of mosques with similar arrangements in 1994 (p. 9). A more recent study, based on data collected in 2010 and 2011, found that the number of mosques with barriers separating the women’s

sections remained at 66%, but that the percentages of mosques where women could serve on the board had increased to 87% (Sayeed, al-Adawiya, & Bagby, 2013, p. 4).⁵⁶

The recommendations in a 2015 statement published by the Islamic Society of North America (one of the supporting organisations of the earlier “Women Friendly Mosques” project) suggest that many of the same problems observed in the earlier reports persist. Part of the statement reads:

Thus we call on all our masjids to be welcoming to women—such that their experience at the masjid be uplifting and not demeaning. To realize the ideal of being welcoming to women, masjids should (a) ensure that women’s accommodations are comfortable, clean and well-lit; (b) support and facilitate women’s activities and groups; and (c) proclaim clearly on the minbar and by other means that women are an integral part of the masjid. (ISNA’s Task Force for Women-Friendly Masjids, 2015)

Additionally, the statement emphasises that women should have access to space in the main prayer area, without being separated from men by any kind of partition. It notes that “When women are in the main *musalla*, they are naturally more attentive, more engaged and thus better able to fulfill their function as *awliya’*—supporters and contributors to establishing the Muslim community” (ISNA’s Task Force for Women-Friendly Masjids, 2015).

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that this study found that Shia mosques, as well as African-American mosques (particularly those following Imam W. Deen Mohammed), were both significantly more women-friendly than Sunni mosques dominated by Arab or South Asian communities (Sayeed, al-Adawiya, & Bagby, 2013, pp. 13-14). While the mosques that have been attended by the women who form the focus of this study fit almost entirely into the latter category, it is important to highlight that they do not necessarily represent all North American mosques. The experiences of people who mainly attend Shia or African-American mosques may be quite different from (and, following the study’s results, more egalitarian than) the stories told here.

It is important to clarify that not all Muslim women are opposed to separate spaces for women and men within mosques; some in fact prefer the privacy of a space that allows them to connect with other women, or to nurse their children without having to worry about covering themselves as would be required when in the presence of men (Hammer, 2012, p. 128). Separate women's spaces in Muslim centres can even sometimes share goals and characteristics with women-centred safe spaces advocated by other feminist groups (Zine, 2008, p. 201). As Jasmin Zine (2008) points out, the segregation of men and women, often justified as a means of reducing "distraction," does not necessarily have to be a hierarchical process, an argument that may resonate for many but does not take into account its underlying heteronormative assumptions. Still, the result is often that men effectively have privileged access not only to the main prayer area but also to the leadership roles within it (p. 197). In her research on Islamic schools in Canada, Zine (2008) spoke to one parent who had noticed children even in kindergarten segregated themselves based on gender, usually with boys sitting in the front, reproducing the differential access to space reflected in other religious settings (p. 197). Arguments against gender segregation tend to take up this question of access, especially as it affects women's abilities to take part in religious activities, whether this means being able to see and hear religious lectures or being able to follow the movements of the imam leading the communal prayer (Hammer, 2012, p. 128). In many cases, the recommendation is to have a separate space available for women who prefer not to be in the same space as the men, while ensuring that women who want to pray in the main prayer area have access to it (Islamic Social Services Associations & Women in Islam, Inc., 2005, p. 12; Sayeed, al-Adawiya, & Bagby, 2013, p. 15).

Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012) notes:

The prevailing status quo naturalizes male control of the public religious space so that women's mere presence in a mosque often needs to be explicated, explained, justified, or vilified. The dominant order of things is such that women are inherently positioned as imposters in the public sacred space. (p. 8)

Hammer (2012) similarly observes that, for women advocating for equal access to space, the gender hierarchies seen in mosque spaces serve as a "metaphor" for other forms of inequality and exclusion within religious communities, and the struggle for equal spaces thus represents a much broader struggle for equal rights, access, and leadership (p. 132). For both Shaikh and Hammer, then, it is clear that what is at stake in these discussions about space is not only the specific question of women's place in the mosque (although that question continues to have relevance in its own right) but also broader issues of equality and presence within Muslim communities.

Blogging personal stories of mosque spaces

As noted above, debates about mosque spaces are not new, nor is the observation that this issue is a central one for many North American Muslims. The question here is what happens to these debates as they are brought into the online translocal spaces of blogs. If, as Harcourt (2000) argues, online networking among women can effectively "[alter] the boundaries between private and public in place-based politics around the body, the community, and public arena" (p. 694), what is most significant for the purposes of this research is not only that the conversations are happening at all, but also (and especially) the question of what is being accomplished (or "altered," in Harcourt's words) as these

conversations unfold on each of these blogs. The narratives from all four blogs explored in this chapter serve a range of purposes as they bring physical spaces into online discussions and use online discussions to (try to) influence physical spaces. These posts also often have the effect of creating spaces online for those who would not be able to connect offline – whether because of physical barriers, which may be due to geography or due to gender segregation even for those in geographic proximity to each other, or because they have disengaged from local communities where they do not feel welcome or comfortable.

The objective of this chapter, then, is not so much to look at the content of debates about mosque spaces, but to interrogate what it means to hold them online, and how this relates to issues of blogging, gender, and Islam in relation to public and counterpublic spheres. In what follows, I begin by looking at what one of Ify's most read posts illustrates about contestations of religious authority in an online public space. Next, I examine a photoblog she created, where she used photographs as a way to expand public knowledge and discussions about women's prayer spaces. I then discuss more direct actions taken by both Ify and Nahida to influence mosques in their own communities, and the role of blogging in these actions. Following this, I look at a discussion series created by Kirstin on her blog as a counterpublic space in which to talk about shared marginalisation from mainstream local Muslim communities and to propose ideas for alternative spaces. In the final part of the chapter, I consider the ways new forms of translocal community and solidarity are cultivated online, the extent to which these can be seen as replacing local communities, and the role of *tafsir* through blogging in imagining new communities.

The issue of women's mosque spaces comes up repeatedly on most of the blogs in this study. Along with the post described above on Kirstin's ideal mosque, wood turtle

includes 41 other posts that address mosque issues, with attention to women's spaces in general as well as the specific marginalisation of mothers and children. These posts include a series of articles in response to the release of the trailer for the documentary film *UnMosqued* (2014), which addresses what it describes as a growing disinterest in mosque participation in the United States, particularly among youth (Aly & Eid, 2014).⁵⁷ For her "unmosqued" series, Kirstin interviewed participants from across North America, asking about their mosque experiences and why they had stopped attending mosques. The Fatal Feminist has 19 posts involving discussions about mosques, including childhood experiences of gender policing and a more recent set of posts asking her readers to contact her local mosque and express their concerns about gendered spaces in the mosque's renovation plans. Ify Okoye's 40 interventions about mosques include not only reflections on her own experiences in various mosque spaces, but also her participation in the Pray In movement, an initiative started in 2010 by activist Fatima Thompson, which involved small groups of women praying in the men's sections of mosques where they felt the women's spaces were inadequate. Ify also created a photo blog dedicated to visually documenting the disparities between women's and men's prayer spaces, a powerful use of the visual potential of the blog. In addition to writing on her own blog, Ify has published a few very widely read pieces on Muslim Matters, a group blog that positions itself as "a platform for orthodox thought leaders to affect positive change" (Muslim Matters, n.d.). Although most of the following discussion is on the personal blog of each writer, I also discuss one of Ify's

⁵⁷ Although *UnMosqued* does raise issues of gendered spaces, gender is not its only focus. In fact, the relative lack of attention to gender issues as part of the problem of contemporary mosques became a source of criticism of the documentary's initial trailer (Saeed, 2013).

Muslim Matters publications at length, because of its wide reach and influence within online discussions about mosque spaces in North America.

In contrast to the other three blogs that I examined, Shehnaz says very little about mosque spaces, touching on the issue in three posts but addressing it in detail in only one. Although the one post she does publish on the topic is consistent in its grievances with those of the other writers (and of the reports on mosques cited above; see pp. 267-269) (Orbala, 8 August, 2013), the issue does not come up in the rest of her writing. Initially, I assumed that this might simply reflect the fact that Shehnaz was not personally invested in going to the mosque, a position not entirely uncommon among women, given that mosque attendance is generally not seen as a religious obligation for women (Sayeed, al-Adawiya, & Bagby, 2013, p. 5). I was thus surprised when she raised it in my interview with her as one of the main problems she encounters with regard to religion and gender. When I asked her about the lack of posts on this question, she responded that her relative silence on the issue was not that it was unimportant to her but rather because it was *too* important: “I have so much to say on that I – that I can’t get myself to sit down and write it, because it’s going to kill me.” While the emotional weight of the issue is not immediately apparent from Shehnaz’s blog, her comments in the interview suggest that the absence of posts on the topics reflects the opposite of my initial conclusion.

Dispatches from the Penalty Box: Contestations of authority in an online public sphere

When I interviewed her, Ify explained that she did not always feel comfortable speaking out about women’s mosque spaces, partly because of her location as a convert:

I didn't say anything for a long time publicly about like the situation in mosques, because... I don't know, you come into a community and kind of just try and learn the norms and whatever. And so... you kind of try and trick yourself into believing like, oh yeah, I like the barriers... nonsense. Like I think I probably would have said that, like ten years ago or... you know, whatever, it gives more privacy, it's... crap.... The reality of the situation... once you like stop with all... that superficial nonsense, is like no, I don't actually like being in a separate room, I don't like not being able to see the imam, I don't like not being able to ask my questions, I don't like being in a balcony up here, like so many things, right?

Over time, however, Ify's reticence to discuss the topic changed dramatically. In February 2010, Ify Okoye published a post on Muslim Matters in which she referred to women's spaces in many mosques as "penalty boxes" (Okoye, 8 February 2010). The post begins with a description of a recent experience where she and a friend had stopped at a mosque to pray on their way to a restaurant. Ify writes that the mosque's women's section was so small and uncomfortable that her friend joked that it "would be more rightly utilized as a penalty box for the men who come late to the *salah*, as a rebuke and punishment." The two women decided instead to pray at the back of the men's section, and later found themselves having to explain their decision to a man who reprimanded them for not praying in the women's section.

Ify's narration of this incident then leads her to talk about a number of other experiences in mosques in which she found the spaces accorded to women to be systemically inadequate and inferior to the men's spaces. She also talks about the injustice of giving women "inferior seat choices," usually at the back, at conferences and seminars

where women had paid the same amount as men to attend. By and large, Ify provides little commentary and seems to want to let these stories speak for themselves. Aside from an indirect reference to a *hadith* suggesting that it is preferable for women to pray at home instead of at the mosque, Ify does not reference any primary texts of scripture or *hadith* in this article. She does make reference to an AlMaghrib Institute⁵⁸ course on Islamic jurisprudence surrounding the ritual prayer, also somewhat indirectly. She mentions that the course addressed the topic of “the right of women to see the imam,” but does not specifically explain what was said about that right. Most of the post, however, is focused on stories of her own personal encounters with inequality with regard to the cleanliness, safety, comfort, aesthetics, and accessibility of women’s spaces as opposed to men’s. In the virtual space of the Muslim Matters blog, accessible to readers across a wide span of geographic locations, Ify draws on narratives of localised experiences to make an argument not only about the unjust nature of those particular physical contexts but also about broader trends related to gendered spaces within mosques and Muslim community events.

While Ify was far from the first person to write about this issue – and, in fact, this was a topic she had already addressed several times earlier on her own blog (see, for example, Okoye, 24 August 2007; 13 October 2007; 22 December 2008) – the Muslim Matters text has been particularly widely read and has had lasting resonance that most of her other posts have not had. The original Muslim Matters post has 382 comments and trackbacks as of September 2015 (most of these are from 2010, but there are a small handful from 2011 and 2014). The post continues to be referenced in other online articles

⁵⁸ Discussed briefly in the Introduction to this dissertation, the AlMaghrib Institute is an organization that holds classes on a range of Islamic topics in cities across North America, and tends to be associated with Salafi readings of Islam (Elliott, 2011).

even years after its publication (Shireen Ahmed, 2013; Nasir, 2015). Kirstin has twice referred to the “penalty box” as a kind of shorthand for her many frustrations with women’s spaces in mosques, both times with a hyperlink to Ify’s original article (wood turtle, 13 October 2010; 15 April 2011). The article thus serves as a kind of rallying cry that has continued to resonate among Muslim women (and men) long since it was first published, reflecting a significant public intervention in debates within many Muslim communities.

As discussed above, blogs can serve as ethical spaces in an online public sphere (Lövheim, 2011b), where bloggers and readers take part in discussions about relevant ethical issues. This blog post and the extensive discussion it provoked reflect a space where a wide range of ideas were shared and heatedly challenged. Fiercely debated too were questions about who was properly qualified to develop and share some of the ideas circulating on the post and in its comment section. Perhaps especially because it was published on a site that sees itself as “orthodox” (Muslim Matters, n.d.), this piece provides numerous illustrations of the standards to which Ify was held by her interlocutors from a more self-proclaimed orthodox perspective, and the standards against which she was asked to justify her position and prove her authority and authenticity in interpreting religious principles. The ethical space of the blog became a space of public contestations about how authority can and should be claimed.

Many of the responses to the Penalty Box are positive and thank Ify for bringing attention to the topic. These come largely from women who share Ify’s frustrations and

experiences, but some male commenters also offer their support.⁵⁹ Others – both women and men – take issue with Ify’s comments. One relatively short comment from someone who gives his name as Abu Yunus illustrates many of the arguments used against Ify’s post:

Your article [is] indicative of how much you have been influenced by the so-called “progressive Muslims”. You are begging the question when you imply that the so-called “penalty box” as you call it is meant to be humiliating and subjugating the women. You also seem to be forget that the best of rows for women are the last ones and the worst are the first ones. Had people not [known] that that was the teaching of the Prophet (S), one would have called the one who spoke such a chauvinist. What happened to the bashfulness and shyness of our women?!?!
Keep your paranoia to yourself – your article is baseless and without precedence.

(Abu Yunus, 8 February 2010)

The comment attacks Ify’s legitimacy by dismissing her agenda as “progressive,” a label that can be used to discredit someone’s authority with regard to Islamic traditions (Chaudhry, 2013, p. 184) or to frame them as an “[agent] of ‘the West’” (Hammer, 2012, p. 62). Another commenter similarly expresses a fear of “Islamophobes jump[ing] all over this article as proof that Islam is anti-women” (AsimG, 9 February 2010). In the latter case, the commenter alludes to an anxiety about surveillance within a larger (non-Muslim) public sphere, where discussions about sexism in Muslim communities do indeed get used to fuel Islamophobia (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Razack, 2008).

The suggestion in Abu Yunus’ comment that Ify’s post is “without precedence” also positions it as not sufficiently authentic as an Islamic argument, highlighting the value

⁵⁹ Of course, any impressions one can gain about a commenter’s gender are based on whatever information they provide or on their username, but cannot be externally verified.

placed on arguments from earlier Islamic scholars in order to locate one's authority.⁶⁰ By referring to "the bashfulness and shyness of our women," Abu Yunus further reprimands Ify for lacking what he sees as proper gendered etiquette for a Muslim woman, implying that her failure is representative of an entire community of women. The commenter's use of a saying from the Prophet that Ify "[seems] to forget" implies that Ify is not relying on the correct sources (although, as Ify points out in a reply to this comment, this *hadith* is one she follows, and she did in fact pray in the back row in the situation that she describes in the post). Through the points made in his comment, Abu Yunus counters Ify's claims largely by undermining her authority to make them, rather than by responding to their content.

Many of the other negative responses to Ify's blog post specifically posit that she should be basing her claims solely on scholarly opinions or on religious texts, implicitly rejecting the arguments Ify makes based on her own observations. In response to some of these comments, Ify does ground her decision to pray in the men's section in more "traditional" Islamic sources, noting not only that she and her friend prayed at the back of the room, with space between them and the men, but also that the earliest period of Islamic history had no physical barrier between the women's and men's prayer sections. Even this, however, does not settle the matter. Writing about an exchange he witnessed in a shared taxi in Cairo, in which participants from a variety of backgrounds responded to points being made about a cassette that was playing a recorded Islamic lecture, Charles Hirschkind (2001) observes that "reference to authoritative Islamic sources does not close debate" (p. 9). Rather, such references served to invite alternative interpretations of such

⁶⁰ As noted earlier in this chapter, Ify's arguments in this blog post did, in fact, have precedents in various kinds of academic and activist work. The commenter's argument, then, not only emphasizes the importance of locating oneself in relation to earlier arguments but also dismisses the precedents that do exist as invalid or irrelevant.

sources, or references to other sources also seen as having authority. The blog comment section seems to have a similar effect, where participants who are not necessarily experts on the issues offer competing Qur'anic verses, *hadiths*, and interpretations thereof to support a multiplicity of perspectives.

In other cases, participants in the discussion suggest that Ify does not have the authority in the first place to use or interpret the sources she cites. One commenter interjects, "Salaam, can we get a scholar in here please!!" (Usman, 9 February 2010), and another notes that they "haven't seen anyone quote what an **actual scholar** has to say on this issue"⁶¹ (Abd- Allah, 9 February 2010). Ify does note in one comment that "The people of knowledge that [she respects] have also validated other seating arrangements [than those requiring women to sit at the back]," but she also emphasises that, in her view, these calls for scholarly or scriptural permission are missing the point. In a reply to the commenter's demand for the opinion of an "actual scholar," Ify writes,

I don't need a fatwa or opinion of a scholar to tell me it is dangerous and illegal to chain and lock exits from the inside. I don't need a fatwa to tell me that there is something wrong or out-of-place or that I may feel unsafe when forced to walk through a dark alley or around a building in the darkness of night. I don't need a fatwa to tell me that I don't feel included or valued or even able to participate effectively in discussions or questions and answer sessions that take place "somewhere over there on the brothers' side". I don't need a fatwa to tell me that it is not only possible but Islamically acceptable to treat women better and afford

⁶¹ Several commenters had, in fact, already cited Yaser Birjas, a graduate of the Islamic University of Madinah and teacher of AlMaghrib's Fiqh of Salah course (presumably the same one that Ify refers to in the post, although she does not name him herself). They cite him as having argued for the right of women to see the imam during congregational prayer.

them better accommodation. These things are common sense. In Islam, we respect the people of knowledge and defer to them to guide us and our actions as they are the inheritors of the prophets, yet Allah has also given us laypeople an intellect with the capacity for critical thinking. Are you going to tell me I need a fatwa before I ask that the exit doors on the sisters' side not be chained and locked from the inside? Or perhaps, some sisters need to be crushed to death or die in a fire in that masjid before we speak up? Or hasn't that already happened somewhere else?

Many of the comments left by readers on Ify's post highlight an ongoing sense of insecurity with regard to religious texts and who has the authority to interpret them, and to publish such interpretations in a public space. Ify's response here does not dispute the status or authority of the "actual scholars" to whom the commenter refers, but she does take issue with the suggestion that their authority would be the only one that matters here, or that it should forcibly supersede the "common sense" and "critical thinking" that she also claims as God-given sources of Islamic knowledge. As discussed in Chapter 2, Ify makes the case that the story she tells, as well as her innate sense of what is right and appropriate, serves as an entirely legitimate basis for religious interpretation. She concludes her response to Abu Yunus, whose comment was quoted above, by telling him, "Maybe you haven't experienced [inadequate and uncomfortable prayer spaces] but I would suggest you visit some women's prayer spaces in your community so you would have some 'basis' and 'precedence' for your own comments." In other words, Ify also challenges the sources he uses to arrive at his opinions, and in this case she suggests that a lack of first-hand experience also reflects an inadequate understanding of her point. The stories she tells in

her original post that provoked this discussion reflect the weight she gives to personal experience (in this case, at mosques and conferences) as a way of knowing definitively that something is wrong with the situation. Although Ify may use textual sources to corroborate that knowledge, she rejects the suggestion that her argument should be dependent on such sources; interestingly, she is much less self-critical in her use of experience, despite some of the pitfalls of basing authority on experience as I discussed in Chapter 2 (see pp. 114-117). The “Penalty Box” post thus becomes a space of ethical deliberation not only about the state of mosques and women’s prayer spaces but also about the bases on which one can make arguments about Islam and Muslim communities.

Photo blogging and the use of images

These discussions also prompted Ify to look for ways to expand the scope of the public discussions, drawing attention to the physical conditions in women’s spaces to a public that includes many men who would never enter such spaces. At the end of her “Penalty Box” post, Ify writes that she is considering creating a photoblog with images of women’s prayer spaces in the mosques that she visits. She explains that the blog would have the role of “highlighting the good and shaming the disgraceful ones,” and that “In discussions such as these, in which emotions run high and rationale is often thrown to the wind, a picture is often worth more than a thousand words” (Okoye, 8 February 2010). Sure enough, a week after that post was published, Ify created a photo blog called “Muslim Women's Prayer Spaces: A photoblog for change, in sha Allah [God willing]” (see Figure 4). The project is also known as “Oursides” and available at <https://oursides.wordpress.com/>.

The purpose of this photoblog was to post pictures of mosques, and especially of women's prayer spaces; the submissions page reads:

Please send us your photos and videos of mosques and Islamic spaces or messages of support from around the globe. Give us a little information about the images, such as who the sides/area are or are not designated for, the location and/or name of the space, whether it is accessible to *all* people (can wheelchairs get in? do they welcome children?) and any pertinent information you think people may like to know about the space. (Oursides, n.d.)



Figure 4: The first picture posted on Oursides, depicting the partitioned women's space within a mosque Ify visited (Okoye, 16 February 2010). Reproduced with permission of Ify Okoye.

The blog includes several sets of pictures from mosques mainly in Ify's local area of Maryland and Virginia, but also including images submitted by readers of mosques from other parts of the United States (see Figure 5), as well as from Morocco and Dubai. Many of the photo posts also include written descriptions of the mosques featured. Along with the photo posts, other posts on the blog feature videos of prominent scholars and speakers talking about mosques and about women's spaces in Muslim communities.

The visual images involved in a photo blogging project of this kind serve a powerful rhetorical purpose to support the written arguments made by Ify and others about

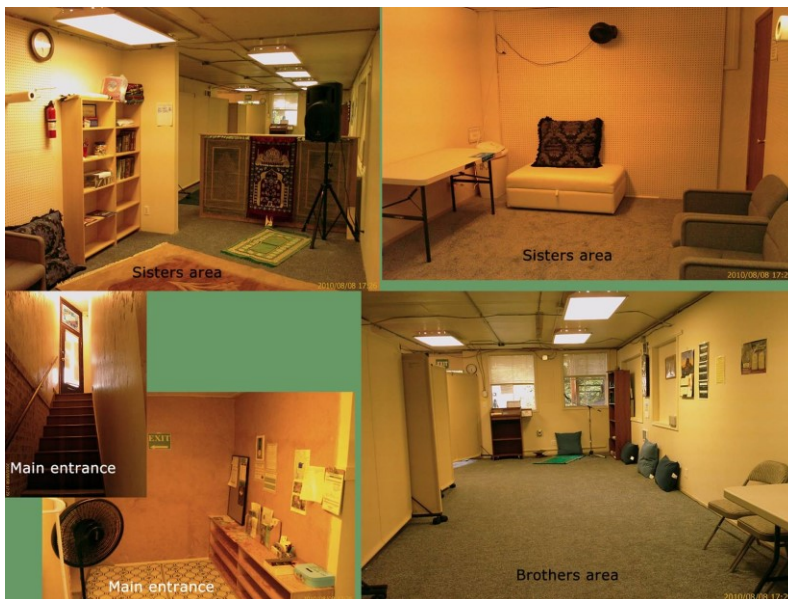


Figure 5: A collage of images from the Islamic Centre of Bothell, WA, submitted to Oursides by Safia Farole (Okoye, 13 November 2010). Reproduced with permission of Ify Okoye.

inequalities between women's and men's mosque spaces. The public visual documentation of so many spaces together acts as evidence that this phenomenon is widespread and systemic. In a later post on her own blog, responding to questions about whether mosques really have a problem when people (men)

have never heard women complain, Ify reiterates that because women have no access to the "community discussions" happening only among men in the men's section, they have no way of making their complaints heard (Okoye, 8 June 2010). In my interview with her, Ify also noted another, perhaps even more basic, function of the photo blog. Because men generally do not have access to women's prayer spaces (particularly in mosques that are entirely segregated by a barrier, a curtain, or the men's and women's sections being on different floors), most men who pray in segregated spaces do not know what the women's section in their own mosque looks like. She explained that, in response to the "Penalty Box" post, "I think a lot of the men were like, oh I don't think it's that bad. I'm like, how the hell would you know? Like, you've never been in the women's section." She also told me about an experience in her local mosque where the exit from the women's section would

sometimes be chained shut from the inside, posing a fire hazard as well as an annoyance. When she raised this with the all-male mosque council, she was told that they had stopped chaining the door “years ago” – even though she had just been there and seen it chained the previous weekend. Although she was frustrated that this man did not know, she also noted that he had no real way of knowing, “because he never goes in on the women’s side... he goes in through the men’s side, which is perfect and nice.”

Posting these photos online serves not only to document a systemic problem but also to allow men virtual access to these spaces, access that they do not have to the physical spaces even if they regularly pray in the same building, so that they can see for themselves the disparities the women encounter in many mosques. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) describes a similar role of blogging within her work on Iranian women’s blogs. By talking openly about their everyday experiences as women, she argues, these bloggers expose men to private experiences that they may not have known about otherwise. While the role of exposing a larger public to private experiences is one that blogging may play in any context, it is perhaps an especially significant one within the framework of communities that have a certain level (or ideal, however contested) of gender segregation, and where there are many women’s spaces or experiences to which men simply do not have access.

Ultimately, the Oursides project was relatively short-lived and eventually merged with Ify’s own blog in July 2011. The Oursides link is still available, but any mosque photo posts after that date were published on Ify’s personal blog (Okoye, 11 July 2011). A similar idea was taken up a year later by Chicago-based activist Hind Makki on a Tumblr page called “Side Entrance,” described as featuring “Photos from mosques around the world, showcasing women’s sacred spaces, in relation to men’s spaces. We show the beautiful, the

adequate and the pathetic” (Side Entrance, n.d.). Side Entrance does not explicitly acknowledge the earlier work by Ify, and it is unclear whether Hind Makki was aware of Ify’s previous efforts in this area when she started the site. A post that Makki wrote on the blog *AltMuslim* explains that she started Side Entrance out of exasperation after having heard too many bad mosque stories and having had too many bad experiences herself (Makki, 27 July 2012). Regardless of whether Side Entrance was deliberately intended to mimic Oursides, it is a very similar project, where readers are invited to submit photos from the mosques that they visit, illustrating both the good and the bad. The site also includes links to relevant articles, and occasional testimonials unaccompanied by photographs. Still relatively active, Side Entrance has received more submissions representing a much wider geographic area than Oursides, and has also received more attention within the blogosphere (Shireen Ahmed, 2013), as well as in some more mainstream media outlets (Parsons, 2014; Hafiz, 2013). When I asked Ify about her thoughts on Side Entrance, she laughed at how an issue that was once difficult to raise and seen as a fringe topic that only a few people were touching is now something that “everyone and their brother” is talking about. Her overall reaction to Side Entrance, however, was one of support and appreciation, noting that “the more voices we can contribute to the work, the better, like it doesn’t matter, as long as we get there.”

Although most of the focus of this dissertation is on the narratives written on blogs, the examples of photoblogs such as Oursides and Side Entrance emphasise the importance of the multimedia dimension of blogs, through with which writers can include not only written text but also images and videos. Ify’s use of the photoblog (and Hind Makki’s use of a similar medium with Side Entrance, as well as Kirstin’s occasional posting of mosque

photos [see Figure 6]) represents one way that the online environment is not only shaped by offline realities but also has the potential to shape these offline spaces. One of Ify's original intentions in starting the blog, after all, was to convey to the people (men) in power what women's spaces in mosques were often like so that those making decisions about mosque spaces would be forced to confront the implications of those



Figure 6: A photo posted on wood turtle, with the caption "I counted three barriers. There's a black screen behind the brown screen" (wood turtle, 21 July 2014). Reproduced with permission of Kirstin Dane.

decisions for female community members. At the very least, the men she describes as ignorant of the state of women's spaces would be left without the excuse that they had no way of knowing. Publically exposing and naming mosques online, especially when accompanied by visual evidence, may also serve to hold mosques accountable to a wider Muslim audience than their local communities. A board member of one of the mosques Ify wrote about even left a comment on her post about that mosque, responding to some of her concerns and explaining some of the mosque's plans to better accommodate women (Okoye, 9 February 2011).

By inviting participants to submit photographs, and by posting pictures of the spaces she visited, Ify works to build new understandings and experiences of shared space among her readers. The online environment becomes a means through which participants can invite one another into visual representations of their physical spaces regardless of

gender, which is not always possible in the actual physical space. They can then also share conversations about that space, whether or not it is one they inhabit physically together. In this way, Ify's photo posts challenge the relegation of women's spaces to only a matter of private concern for women, and instead attempt to transform the larger conversations about mosques in ways that frame women's spaces as being of public importance.

Translocal targeting of local mosques

At other points, the public identification of problems with specific mosques comes with more direct incitement to take action. In August 2012 – during Ramadan – Nahida posted an article on The Fatal Feminist about the renovation plans for her local (and “favourite”) mosque. The post describes mixed feelings upon initially hearing about the renovation plans:

I liked my little mosque—quiet, [unassuming], a humble part of the supreme nature that surrounded it. But I was hoping also that with the renovation the women's area would finally be extended to be as large as the men's. (the fatal feminist, 13 August 2012)

She then tells readers about the announcement that she heard at the mosque the previous evening: that the new mosque would provide space for up to 393 men and 160 women.

The post also includes an image of the proposed layout for the redesigned mosque. Nahida talks about her frustration with the renovation plans, and makes a very heartfelt plea to readers of the blog to contact the mosque themselves (she provides a link to a contact form and email address) and voice their concerns. Emphasising the need for complaints to be voiced within a framework of Islamic etiquette and religious justifications, she writes,

Offer your salaams, wish the project team Ramadan Mubarak, and request that they redesign the plan to provide an equal amount of space for both sexes and that they rid of any procedures to install a barrier separating the two areas. Of course an Islamic explanation for why this is critical may be provided in your request if you wish, but I feel I am asking too much from you already. (the fatal feminist, 13 August 2012)

In this case, her blog became a space to share her experience and commiserate with others, to appeal for members of her online community to take action to help change the plans for her local mosque. Several people left notes confirming that they had emailed the mosque as she had asked. Although they were geographically far away, they were able to participate in the project in Nahida's local area, and their actions demonstrate a sense of collective investment in the transformation of mosque spaces, even when this particular space may not be one they would ever visit.

Nahida later wrote a follow-up post to update readers on the status of the mosque renovations, explaining that the mosque had recently said that, in response to complaints, they were planning to "'fix something' about the discrepancy in the space allotted to women compared to men," although she also says she "[doesn't] really trust the committee" or have any details on what the proposed changes are. Nonetheless, she expresses gratitude (in the form of "A THOUSAND HUGS!") to readers who offered support, and especially those who sent complaints to the mosque (the fatal feminist, 20 December 2012).

While the commenters' support for Nahida could be read as simply reflecting their respect for her as a writer, or their sense of affection or friendship towards her (both of

which are likely true for many of the commenters), several of the comments suggest that something else is at play as well. In most of the comments left in response to the first post about the proposed mosque renovation, readers describe their own similar experiences of frustration in mosques that they have frequented. The first commenter, who goes by the name Redd, writes that “Nothing breaks my heart more than having to go and pray in a women’s prayer room, it truly hurts me,” and proceeds to tell a story about an experience of her own (Redd, 13 August 2012). Another commenter notes that she is “facing exactly this with a mosque in my area” (qatheworld, 13 August 2012). There is a sense that the commenters’ responses are directly linked to their own experiences, and many of them seem to be acting, at least in part, in response to their own experiences and not only to Nahida’s. In this interaction, the shared virtual space of the blog carries a particularly strong connection to the physical spaces that these online participants occupy, such that their sense of shared experience – and the action that they take as a result – takes precedence over any suggestion that they are not “really” sharing the same physical space.

In her most recent post about the mosque renovation, Nahida again affirms her “love” for the readers who took the time to contact the mosque administration (the fatal feminist, 31 August 2014). After a discussion about how the tone of women’s protests can be policed and ignored – with polite protests being quietly dismissed, while more vocal or aggressive activists can be reprimanded for not being sufficiently polite – Nahida gives the latest update:

To speak of barriers, the construction project is not yet complete, and the letters were not addressed. It is *especially* easy to ignore polite requests when they are not embodied in people who are demanding a response with their presence, and

must instead write letters. However, because of a couple of women who walked out of the prayer area due to how *degrading* the separation of this space is—the mosque board announced that the new building will not have a barrier.

I don't believe them.

Other than the fact that the word of a Muslim man is just about as reliable as Pluto's planetary status, men... will, being the sparkling politicians they are, say whatever sounds like great PR at the moment. No victory cries until the project is complete.

Nahida's gratitude for her readers' support is tempered here with an acknowledgement of the limitations of online activism in relation to physical prayer spaces. As she notes, the fact that some of those protesting are not physically present means that those making decisions may not feel accountable in the same way to make changes. At the same time, given Nahida's lack of faith in the mosque board's promised changes, even when in response to the actions of women who were physically present, it remains uncertain whether the requests sent by email were actually any less effective than the actions of the women who were physically present in the space. We might then conclude that all of these forms of solidarity and activism find their value, at least as far as Nahida is concerned or until evidence of concrete changes is available, primarily as symbolic gestures of protest against an unequal situation. Still, the role of the readers' participation in contacting the mosque in reinforcing community online suggests that their value is not only symbolic, and not wholly contingent on whether the mosque administration makes the requested changes.

The conversations among Nahida and her readers with regard to her mosque's construction plans reflect a process not only of collective interpretation of religious sources and experiences but also shared actions as they put these interpretations into practice. Nahida's use of religious etiquette – asking readers to “offer salaams,” a religious greeting that translates to “peace be upon you,” and to convey their wishes for a blessed Ramadan, before commenting on the mosque plans – suggests another possible dimension of *tafsir* through blogging. In this request to readers, Nahida appears to consider not only the content of the message that should be conveyed, but also what it looks like to convey the message in an appropriately “Islamic” way, and which religious principles should be considered in terms of comportment as she asks her readers to contact the mosque. She thus locates herself within a religious framework that places value on manners and ethical conduct. On the other hand, this emphasis on etiquette may simply be a tactical move on Nahida's part, reflecting more of a concern for what will most appeal to the committee than her own commitment to a particular set of manners. From other posts, it is clear at the very least that speaking politely to authority figures is not something that Nahida views as a requirement in all circumstances.⁶² Her request may then be best understood as an example of what Pia Karlsson Minganti (2012) calls “tactical orthodoxy,” which refers to “temporary allusions to one's own perceived higher degree of piety in order to realize personal preferences” (p. 384). This is not to say that Nahida's request is insincere, but simply to note the multiple purposes that it serves in acting generously while also communicating in the language most likely to be accepted. If one role of *tafsir* through

⁶² For example, Nahida later writes about Abu Eesa, a teacher with AlMaghrib institute who drew controversy in 2014 for sexist comments he posted on International Women's Day, posting a screenshot of a tweet where she tells him to “Get a life you rape apologist” (the fatal feminist, 7 February 2015).

blogging is to cultivate a kind of virtuous religious self, Nahida's suggestions here demonstrate that this act of publicly claiming religious high ground can exist as a tactical move as well as an exercise in virtue.

On Ify's blog, her writing about her participation in local "Pray In" protests also becomes a way that specific actions directed at local mosques are brought into her online worlds. As described on page 272, these protests involved women in the Washington, D.C. area who prayed in the men's sections of mosques where they found the women's sections too small or otherwise uncomfortable or inappropriate. Ify describes the movement's intended activities and goals as follows:

Through engagement with community members and leaders, panel discussions, articles in a variety of media outlets, and pray-in protests we seek to initiate discussion and positive action within our various communities. The issue is not simply getting safer, better-lit or more comfy accommodation (although that is important) but more importantly the concerns range from how women are treated, included or excluded, and valued or devalued in community life and participation within the Muslim community. (Okoye, 8 June 2010)

Ify contends that, by going into mosques and praying in the men's section – albeit at the back – these women were physically claiming what they saw as their rightful place in the mosque, based on their understanding of what it means to "return to [the] practice 'closest to the sunnah'" (Okoye, 6 June 2010). The Pray In actions eventually attracted media attention from outside Muslim communities when authorities at the Islamic Centre of Washington called police on the protestors, accusing them of trespassing (Wan & Laris, 2010; Esfahani Smith, 2010). Ify writes that the police forced the women outside, and

“continued to harass” the protestors as they prayed outside the mosque (Okoye, 6 June 2010). The *Muslim Link*, an online and print newspaper geared to Muslims living in and around Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, describes the incident at the Islamic Centre of Washington as “a confrontation [that] ensued between the caretaker of the masjid and the Pray-In group” (a claim that Ify disputes [Okoye, 6 June 2010]), and notes that the police were also called to a Pray In protest at Dar al-Hijrah mosque a couple months later (Muslim Link Staff, 3 June 2010).

An active member of the Pray In movement, Ify blogged about it both on her own blog (Okoye, 6 June 2010; 8 June 2010) and at Muslim Matters (Okoye, 7 June 2010). Her blog posts are largely about responding to questions and challenges to the movement that arose from within Muslim communities, both local and translocal. While she did not explicitly ask for specific actions from supporters in the same way that Nahida did in her posts about local mosque renovations, she did use the space of the blog as a way of voicing her grievances about her local physical prayer spaces, and justifying the actions she and her fellow activists undertook to challenge what they saw as unequal (and religiously inadequate) spaces for women. Ify’s stories about the protests drew significant support and criticism, mainly from people who, like Nahida’s readers, did not necessarily share the experiences of being in the same physical prayer space as Ify, but nonetheless had strong opinions based on their own experiences in their local communities about whether Ify’s claims and actions were justified. In several blog posts, Ify addressed the criticisms directly. One post responds to the *Muslim Link* article mentioned above, noting what she describes as inaccuracies in its description of the events (Okoye, 6 June 2010). Another, cross-posted at both Muslim Matters and Ify’s personal blog, is written in question-and-answer style,

and takes up a number of possible objections to the movement's goals and methods (Okoye, 7 June 2010; 8 June 2010).

What both of these examples from Nahida's and Ify's blogs have in common is not only their focus on more targeted actions linked to specific mosques, but also significant effort on the part of both bloggers to establish the legitimacy of these actions. In Nahida's case, this appears mainly through the anticipation of possible critiques; along with her encouragement to readers to follow certain principles of Islamic etiquette, as described above, she also suggests that readers include an "Islamic explanation for why this is critical" in their appeals to the mosque's board to create more egalitarian spaces. In the example of Ify's involvement in the Pray In movement, the appeal to legitimacy is seen especially in her writing justifying the group's actions after the fact, in which she responds both to blog comments and to media coverage. In contrast to the examples of *tafsir* through praxis provided by Sa'diyya Shaikh (2007), who writes largely about the decisions of individual women who interpret religious principles in their domestic lives, engaging in a process of *tafsir* through praxis in the context of a blog or in other publicly-available forums of expression implies that one must negotiate questions of legitimacy in relation to an audience. This negotiation may, at times, take the form of an outright rejection of the criteria that might establish legitimacy in the first place, but even in that case, the writer must contend with voices that call their authority into question, even if their response is simply to reject those voices. What takes place through these narratives and textual interpretations is not only an individual development of religious ideas and practices, but also a form of justifying these to the blogs' readers and inviting readers to join in.

Hosting a discussion: wood turtle's *Unmosqued* series

At times, rather than focusing on public statements about the state of mosques or working to change existing mosques, bloggers instead work to establish new online spaces for those who find themselves outside of mainstream Muslim communities. As discussed in Chapter 1, these spaces (although they remain accessible to a wider public sphere) echo Nancy Fraser's (1990) conception of the counterpublic more readily than conceptions of the public sphere, as they provide opportunities to withdraw from mainstream spaces in order to organise towards changing the discourses that dominate in the larger public sphere. In February 2013, not long after the release of the initial trailer for the documentary *UnMosqued*, Kirstin began a series of posts on wood turtle that looked at experiences in prayer spaces, and particularly at why a number of fellow Muslims thought of themselves as "unmosqued." Bringing together interview responses from activists, bloggers, and academics from across North America, wood turtle's "unmosqued" series considers questions of personal experience, religious principles, and Muslim community spaces. Reader comments on the series of articles came from across Canada and the United States, as well as from as far away as Germany, South Africa, and Reunion Island. While it is normal for blog posts to become spaces of discussion in the comment sections, these posts are in themselves already a kind of group discussion, as each post contains interview responses from several people, put together and edited by Kirstin. The series thus illustrates additional possibilities of how bloggers can use their online platforms for collective discussions of religious spaces.

The "unmosqued" series on wood turtle begins with an introductory post written by Kirstin, and follows with four subsequent posts over the following two weeks that include

further reflections from the blogger herself, as well as from nine participants from across North America, who had been recruited through social media and who responded to a series of questions that Kirstin had prepared. Kirstin describes the participants as “brilliant and wonderful, faithful and searching, converts, immigrants and second-generation, ‘unmosqued’ and regular attendees, geeky and hipster, parents, LGBTQ, sisters, brothers, religious and unapologetic heretics” (wood turtle, 20 February 2013). In the introductory post, Kirstin talks about some of her own experiences with local mosques, and why she has come to see herself as “unmosqued.” She writes about feeling judged by a fellow congregant at a mosque, an event she deems to be the “last straw” in a string of bad experiences she had in various mosques. She also criticises many mosques for their organisational structures, the lack of facilities for women and children, and sermons that are often irrelevant and that avoid important community issues. She emphasises that there is precedent within Islamic history for mosques to do much better. In fact, she writes about Islam’s first ever mosque as a centre of community and learning, arguing that “Mosques are supposed to be the spiritual centre of the community, open to all without criticism, judgement or discrimination, supporting those who need it, fostering equality, and engaging in public service” (wood turtle, 20 February 2013).

Kirstin frames the “unmosqued” series on her blog as a set of conversations that will look at why people have become “unmosqued,” where they are currently “finding community,” and what changes people feel need to be made to mosques in order to make them relevant again. Each of the posts that follow in the series is structured around a set of questions that wood turtle asked to each of the participants, looking at their past and current mosque and community involvement (wood turtle, 21 February 2013), the reasons

they have become “unmosqued” (wood turtle, 24 February 2013), the ways that they find “community or connection to other Muslims” (wood turtle, 27 February 2013), and how and whether mosques can change to become more relevant to contemporary Muslim communities (wood turtle, 7 March 2013).

The responses of people who participated in the interviews reflect a number of reasons for being “unmosqued.” One woman, Ida, notes that she hasn’t left mosques altogether, but that she does not currently go to mosque regularly because she does not feel the ones in her area respond to her needs. For some of the participants, being unmosqued is partly a result of life circumstances. Sajida, another participant, talks about having moved around too frequently in recent years to feel fully at home in any one community (wood turtle, 24 February 2014). Many others have essentially stopped going to mosques at all, whether because of the inhospitable physical space, the content of the sermons, the inaccessibility of the language used at the mosque (many mosques offer sermons in Arabic or in the language of the dominant Muslim ethnic group that frequents the mosque), or the judgement that they face about their religious practices. Women’s spaces come up repeatedly as a particular concern for both the men and women who participated in the series. Several commenters express a longing to find a mosque where they would feel comfortable, and the emotional and spiritual struggles they face when they feel unwelcome in mosque spaces (wood turtle, 24 February 2013).

What is interesting about these conversations is not only their content but also their context, and what it reveals about how physical spaces are brought into online discussions. Kirstin’s project brings together a group of participants to address concerns centred on very localised spaces, and yet these participants come together online in a space so often

understood as disembodied, where delineations of physical space, whether the walls of buildings or the borders of countries, are not supposed to matter. And in many ways, they do not seem to matter; participants in these conversations are scattered across North America and around the world, and are only able to connect to each other at all thanks to the online media that they use. At the same time, these conversations were prompted by, and continually return to, concerns about tangible physical spaces. This coming together about shared experiences always comes back to the spaces that they do not share in a more literal, physical sense.

Further, many of the participants talk about what they would want in their ideal mosque: better trained imams capable of delivering more thoughtful sermons; bigger and better spaces for women; an inclusive and non-judgemental atmosphere; support for marginalised groups such as immigrants, women, youth, and LGBTQ Muslims; facilities for sports and other activities; and efforts to make the space more visually beautiful. Again, this is a shared conversation, with the potential for participants to take ideas from one another. But while this brainstorming can happen collectively online, many of these people would not actually be able to visit each other's spaces even if these ideal spaces did exist somewhere physically and were otherwise accessible regardless of gender or physical ability, because of the geographic distances between them.

In narrating their own experiences and hopes within a group context, the participants (interviewees as well as commenters) in wood turtle's "unmosqued" series form part of a collective praxis of *tafsir* through blogging – something that is visible as well in the conversations arising out of other posts on all four blogs, but especially so in this intentional counterpublic group conversation. It is perhaps fitting that this topic of

communal spaces is where we find the most deliberate attempt to facilitate a communal discussion, in which experiences of space are discussed as shared, and participants come together online to collectively deliberate on what it would look like to establish religious centres that are accessible and welcoming to all.

But are online spaces replacing local communities?

When I interviewed Nahida, I asked her about whether her online conversations about gender issues in religious communities were also reflected in conversations she was having with people in her local mosques. She responded:

I talk about them [gender issues] more online, but... at the very beginning [of her time blogging] especially, I would also bring them up with the women who attended the mosque with me. And I remember telling one woman that there shouldn't be a barrier in the prayer area, and... I remember she said, "Oh, we should be happy with what we have." Which I thought was a very interesting statement, because it didn't just mean that she didn't want to start a fight. I mean, it also meant that she understood – she realised that she wasn't getting everything that she was supposed to.... I mean, "we should be happy with what we have" – it just told me that she was conscious of the fact of everything she didn't have, and everything she should have. And so a lot of times when I had these discussions with the women at the mosque, they would find it interesting for a while, but then they would forget about it, and so... I mean, to answer your question, I stopped after a while because I wasn't really getting anywhere.

The disconnect between wanting to address these issues within local communities but ultimately focusing her efforts on blogging was echoed by the other bloggers, as well as many of their readers. Several of the participants and commenters in wood turtle's "unmosqued" series refer to the internet as a means of maintaining a sense of religious community, as does Kirstin herself. A commenter who goes by the name "Smile Sadaqa" writes:

There is no sense of community at the mosque if you're not from the very particular regional and linguistic group that dominates: for the rest of us it is simply a building set aside for prayer. We try to substitute the lack of community with virtual, online worlds, but these are mostly imaginary too. (Smile Sadaqa, 6 March 2013)

Given that a "lack of community" is one of the criticisms made against some mosques – one of the reasons, for example, that participants in Kirstin's series define themselves as "unmosqued" – one might ask if the internet provides some kind of replacement, or substitution, as the commenter writes. Predictably, the answer is more complicated than a simple yes or no. On the one hand, when I posed this question to Kirstin in an interview, she was clear that, for her, the online environment functions differently from a mosque: it can create and sustain interpersonal connections, but it does not replace the mosque. Her reply to Smile Sadaqa's comment about substituting the mosque community with an online one emphasises and illustrates this point, specifically by drawing attention to what online communities are not capable of providing. Kirstin responds that "[online worlds] shore you up when you need to vent, discuss and even offer support and sympathy — but when it comes down to the needs of a physical structure (for

such important things as life events: aqeeqas [rituals conducted after the birth of a baby], janaazas [funerals], weddings, etc), the virtual world sadly falls short” (wood turtle, 27 February 2013). Many of these “life events” are also subject to legal requirements that people be physically present in order for the ritual to be valid, which further highlights the ways that the online context cannot completely replace the physical one. At the same time, some participants in worship activities online may be less concerned about legal requirements regarding presence and proximity, or may see the online set-up as holding legal validity. It is also worth noting that many of the participants in the “unmosqued” series replace the mosque with other physical communities: alternative physical religious spaces, Muslim organisations that meet in physical spaces but are not mosque-based, or informal gatherings among Muslim friends (wood turtle, 27 February 2013).

On the other hand, while it is clear that online communities are not replacing mosques in the sense of fulfilling all of the roles that mosques may be expected fulfill, in many cases, the mosques are not fulfilling all their desired functions either. In the absence of mosques that respond sufficiently to the needs of community members, it is the internet, and not the inadequate mosques, that seems to be the “next best thing” for many of the bloggers and their readers. Of course, these comments cannot be said to be representative of all Muslims as participants in online discussions in general, and in discussions about exclusion from mosques in particular, are largely self-selected as a group of people who find meaning in online community. Shehnaz described a very similar sense of community online when I interviewed her. She explained that, with the exception of some of the students and professors that she had come to know only since starting her doctorate, the people she considers to be her religious community – in the sense of shared ideas,

commitments, and perspectives – are those with whom she is only connected online, a community that she has had since she first started blogging in 2006. In my interview with Kirstin, she explained that “[the blog audience is] mostly women. Which is fine, because they’re not going to the mosque anyway... they all tell me they’ve stopped going to the mosque.... I’ve had women say, I come to your blog for community.” She also talked about her role as community-builder among her blog readers, a form of a connection that she would not get at a mosque. Kirstin’s blog has also become a platform for discussing many of the issues that she feels are missing from sermons and other official mosque discourses. In other words, even if the blog space does not replace a mosque, it is nonetheless being used instead of a mosque to foster community and connection. Moreover, as was discussed above, there are some ways the blog space allows for communities that couldn’t come together in a physical mosque; there are elements that are both lost and gained through this creation of online communities.

Further, to take commenter Smile Sadaqa’s words at face value and see online communities as “mostly imaginary” means adopting a limited view of such communities, given that participants in online communities generally do not experience their activities online as being “not real” (Guimarães , 2005, p. 145). Robert V. Kozinets (2010) argues plainly that online communities are “real communities populated with real people,” and thus simply cannot be understood as virtual (p. 15). In the context of the relationships being created through online interactions on blogs – and even the spaces that *are* acknowledged as not-real, such as the future mosque imagined by Kirstin in the anecdote that begins this chapter – the idea of the online realm being always less “real” than offline worlds underplays the kinds of connections and communities that can be built on the

internet. Even if the commenter quoted above laments the “imaginary” nature of online communities, it is evident that the role and value of such communities in their lives is not entirely an imaginary one. This emotional component of online interactions – emphasised here in the sense of reducing feelings of isolation, but likely present in other ways as well – can be a major element of the ways that communities are built online and the investment that members of the community have. Kirstin’s comment that online communities “shore you up” highlights this, as did Shehnaz’s enthusiastic characterisation of her online community as “the happiest thing for me” when she spoke to me about it in our interview. By allowing for open expression of emotion, online communities can also build “affective grounds for solidarity,” in ways that have been observed play a strengthening role within other counterpublics (Sziarto & Leitner, 2010, p. 6).

In some cases, opting for community on the internet instead of the mosque is also a question of logistics. When I spoke to Kirstin, she talked about the challenges of going to a mosque now, as the busy working mother of two young girls; being active online is at times a more convenient and realistic way of finding community. Interestingly, when she talked about what a mosque might be able to do to better accommodate her and others in her position, she gave the example of live-streaming sermons or lectures so that people could listen from home. This suggestion presents a different possibility for what it might look like to seek religious community online, and how the barriers between physical and online prayer spaces could become even more blurred.

On the other hand, the idea of entirely replacing physical spaces with online ones may seem problematic from a strategic angle. If women and members of marginalised groups find themselves moving online in order to “find community,” mainstream locally

situated institutions may find themselves even less inclined – and possibly less pressured – to make their spaces more accessible and inviting for women (or for people with disabilities, among others). Although having the option of engaging in religious communities online may make things logistically easier for women who are, for example, primary caregivers for their children, it would also reinforce perceptions that women *should* be at home rather than at the mosque. In fact, as was noted above, a *hadith* to this effect is often cited as a defence of inadequate women's spaces in mosque, the suggestion being that women who complain about mosque spaces would best fulfill their religious duties by praying at home, and thus the space in the mosque should not matter. At the same time, Ify writes that, while the *hadith* about the benefits of praying at home is widely known,

We also know that there are immense benefits derived from the positive reinforcement of coming together to meet and network with sisters, learning the religion, doing activities together, and praying and breaking our fasts communally that are not so easily dismissed with appeals for us to stay at home.

(Okoye, 24 August 2007)

The act of building community online thus has mixed effects for bloggers and their audiences, who find themselves both valuing the spaces and connections that are formed online while continuing to fight – both online and in their local communities – for better access to physical spaces. While there is much overlap between online and offline communities and worship, the bloggers' words suggest that there are also distinct advantages to each that cannot be compensated for by the other.

Links to other online religious communities

Of course, blogs are not the only online spaces where new forms of religious community are being cultivated, often with complex relationships to physical congregations. The El-Tawhid Juma Circle, also called the Toronto Unity Mosque, is a Toronto-based group that meets for Friday prayers every week and defines itself as a gender-equal and queer-affirming space that tries to be inclusive and accessible to its members (El-Tawhid Juma Circle, n.d.).⁶³ Although this group began as a local community that meets in a physical space, a role that it continues to play, it has also developed a very active online community. This is evident not only in the Juma Circle's Facebook group but also in its prayer services themselves, where people in other cities – particularly where they do not feel connected to any local community – join in the Toronto-based local gathering over Skype (El-Tawhid Juma Circle, n.d.). Although this began as a way of allowing people in other cities to hear the sermons, many of those who take part over Skype also participate in the ritual congregational prayer, and it is not unusual for the congregation that is mostly physically gathered in Toronto to hear the call to prayer over Skype, often done by a woman living in New York state. Participants on Skype can also join in group discussions or ask the congregation for prayers. Praying behind an imam over Skype may not be seen as legally valid in the eyes of many. However, the mosque organisers raise a different point: if women's sections in some mosques have no physical visual connection to the men's section, and women sometimes watch the imam over a television screen, should their participation as part of the congregation be considered any less "virtual" than those following an imam over a computer screen hundreds of kilometres

⁶³ Kirstin has occasionally attended prayers at the El-Tawhid Juma Circle and mentions the group on the blog (wood turtle, 27 February 2013).

away? This is the kind of question that may arise increasingly as new online possibilities for religious experience expand.

At the same time, it remains relevant to this discussion that most of the members of the Toronto Unity Mosque meet in person. Similarly, some of the participants in wood turtle's "unmosqued" discussion also talk about having created or joined alternative prayer spaces, and all of these are physical spaces in their local communities. Even though the groups may reinterpret some of the rules and norms for what a Muslim religious space should look like, they are still physically grounded in a particular geographic location (wood turtle, 27 February 2013). This is perhaps not a surprise, but it emphasises the need, or at least the preference, that some participants feel for a physical space. While the online community may be important, many of those who have sought community online continue to prioritise physical spaces as the ideal – as opposed, for example, to creating a community in which no two people share the same physical space but all meet online.

The use of the internet to expand and transform spaces of religious learning and community is, of course, not restricted to groups seen as feminist or progressive. The Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference, a three-day convention held in Toronto every December and attended by thousands of Muslims, can now be streamed online for a fee. Also based in Toronto, Seeker's Hub provides free Islamic classes, with some attendees present in person and others participating online through livestreaming or by watching recordings at a later time, or by taking part in online discussion forums. Numerous other examples can be offered. Although in many of these cases, activities may remain off-limits to an online audience because of concerns about ritual validity – it is unlikely, for example, that participants in an online Seeker's Hub class would be invited to join in a ritual *salah*

prayer behind an imam who is not physically in the same building as them – they do all offer slightly different configurations of access to sacred knowledge, perhaps especially for female participants. In contrast to the sometimes unequal spaces of religious learning that Ify describes in her Penalty Box post, where the segregation of the men’s and women’s sections sometimes meant that women were forced to sit in the back of the room (Okoye, 8 February 2010), these online forums provide an opportunity for all of the online students to have the same sense of proximity to the speaker, sidestepping – though without violating – rules or sensibilities regarding appropriate interactions across genders.

Of course, live streaming a video feed is a very different kind of online religious experience from, for example, accessing asynchronous blog archives. All of these examples, however, demonstrate that whether large- or small-scale, and with a range of opportunities for active participation, online participation in religious communities that also meet in physical locations continue to expand. The internet thus serves not only to create new spaces for communities to form, but also to reshape existing offline communities as they use newly-available tools to meet an expanded range of needs. All of these examples can serve to expand the conversation about what it might mean to use the internet to build religious communities, and what the role and relevance of local physical spaces may be in relation to online ones.

Imagining new spaces

I want to end this chapter by returning to the opening discussion of an imagined future mosque. O’Leary’s (2004) exhortation to “ask what ritual *gains* in the virtual environment” (p. 47), discussed earlier in this chapter (see pp. 258-260), is especially

relevant. While Kirstin's act of describing this mosque is not itself a religious ritual per se, it does serve as a rhetorical invitation to her readers to enter into a shared sacred space with her. In this context, it is important to consider not only what is lacking – a real physical mosque that fits Kirstin's description – but also what is made possible by the online environment: in this case, a collective imagining of space by those who do not (and likely will never, in most cases) occupy the same physical spaces, and thus a kind of sharing of sacred space and religious community that can only happen virtually. Moreover, Kirstin's description of this ideal space allows her to bypass some of the constraints imposed by what is lacking in the physical spaces available to her; the virtual world is not alone in not entirely fulfilling her needs and desires. Like the virtual *hajj*, Kirstin's imagined mosque can be seen not only as reflecting distance and absence from where she would like to be, but also as a way of accessing a space, and bringing readers to it, that is otherwise (at least for now) inaccessible to her.

Writing about Muslim women engaged in rethinking Islamic practices and ideas across transnational networks, cooke (2001) asks, "How can they find this speaking position that is both local and global?" The answer she suggests is "that Islam provides the symbolic capital for the construction of such an apparently contradictory rhetorical space" (p. xx). Similarly, Taieb Belghazi (2005) argues that it is through "an alternative narrative of Muslim loyalty and legitimacy" that Muslim women are able to use the internet effectively to create subversive spaces (p. 278). In both of these cases, even as these women are challenging dominant understandings of Islam, it is through claiming their own place within Islam, and through their own mobilisation of religious discourses, that they are able to form alternative communities and spaces. Of course, there are surely also

Muslim women, or women of Muslim backgrounds, who form networks in which religious discourses are ignored or rejected entirely. But what cooke and Belghazi both highlight is that there are powerful ways Muslim women can use their own understandings of Islam to create and strengthen bonds and networks, sometimes with others who may be very far away. Simultaneously, they use these bonds and networks to inform and further their own understandings and practices of Islam.

Conclusion

This move to create community through the relationship one claims to Islam highlights one function of *tafsir* through blogging that may not be immediately apparent in earlier discussions of the phenomenon. As introduced in Chapter 2 and discussed at more length in Chapter 3, *tafsir* through blogging as observed in these four Muslim women's blogs can establish particular interpretations of Islam arrived at through considerations and narrations of individual personal experience. The examples offered in this chapter elucidate an additional dimension of this practice, namely that *tafsir* through blogging can serve not only to ground one's own religious interpretations but also to create a platform upon which translocal communities can come together and share similar stories. Through this process, local communities and spaces are also transformed, as bloggers and readers support each other in protesting and trying to reshape local spaces, and as visual representations of private gendered spaces circulate publicly online.

Whether it is through leaving comments or contributing photographs, Muslim feminist bloggers and their readers join in these processes of *tafsir* through blogging by adding their own stories and expanding a field that becomes one of collective deliberation

and interpretation. Although fluid and unpredictable, the communities formed through these collective processes are not entirely incidental. *Tafsir* through blogging in the context of these blogs and their writers thus becomes a way not only of using personal narratives to inform religious interpretations, but also of using these processes to form networks and communities – which in turn push their feminist interpretive work forward.

Conclusion

In September 2013, as I was beginning the online fieldwork stage of this research from my apartment in Montreal, the Quebec Charter of Values was announced. With it came widespread public conversations about “ostentatious religious symbols,” which focused largely on the headscarf. These conversations – often led by prominent self-proclaimed feminists – were accompanied by statements labeling Muslim women who wore the scarf as oppressed, brainwashed, and crazy (Bellerose, 2013; Radio-Canada, 2013). The same period saw a substantial increase in reports of hate crimes aimed at Muslims, and in particular at Muslim women (Peritz, 2013). In November of that year, with the atmosphere still very tense, there was a large conference that brought together feminists from across Quebec with the intention of setting the agenda for Quebec feminist movements for the next two decades.⁶⁴ Needless to say, the Charter was a huge topic of conversation, and I found myself presenting on a panel on Islamic feminism as a representative of the Collective des féministes musulmanes du Québec (the Muslim feminist collective of Quebec). After another woman presented an overview of Islamic feminism, my role was to give a talk for thirty minutes about my research, in French, to illustrate some of the work that Muslim feminists are doing, using the blogs as a glimpse into some of the thoughts and reactions Muslim feminists have to sexism in their communities, and some of the creative solutions they propose.

Given the weight of the topic, it was not a surprise to see the room filled with many more people than it had chairs to accommodate, and I will admit that I felt terrified. But as I began the presentation, I could feel the tension in the room ease a bit as I shared some of

⁶⁴ For more on this event, the États-généraux de l'action et l'analyse féministes, see <http://www.etatsgenerauxdufeminisme.ca/>.

the funny anecdotes and snarky comments that arose on the blogs. Audience members laughed along at some of the language used, and were genuinely intrigued at some of the honest and thoughtful conversations I was quoting. In response to accusations that Muslim women were simply the victims of false consciousness, not realising the degree to which they were oppressed, I was able to offer examples of Muslim women talking frankly and openly about sexism within their communities, clearly aware of what they were up against. On the other hand, in a climate where women of Muslim heritage who could speak publicly about the supposedly monstrous and oppressive nature of Muslim societies were being held up on a pedestal, I was able to make it clear that these bloggers who were critical of patriarchal religious structures were nonetheless looking *within* religious texts and principles to find solutions, rather than looking for outsiders to save them. The women I was writing about were not critiquing mosques, for example, simply as a way of demonstrating how terrible Muslim men can be; they were critiquing mosques because they *wanted* to be there, to *pray* there.

Should I have really had to do that work to show that Muslim women are complex and intelligent human beings? Probably not. But using these blogs as a window into internal conversations among Muslim women nonetheless became a powerful tool in a very hostile context where Muslim women were being so often discussed but rarely included in the conversation. When I had initially begun to narrow down the topic of this dissertation, I had envisioned its contributions mainly within research on religious conversations online and within the field of Muslim feminism, specifically as it relates to discussions internal to Muslim communities. That conference, however, highlighted some of the other potential uses for the analysis developed here. The women represented in my research do not fit

into the monolith of the “oppressed Muslim woman,” and neither do they fall into the category of the “good Muslim” native informant whose role is to testify to the barbarity of Muslims and Islam. Their narratives – and the reactions they provoked among those who heard my talk – demonstrate the complexity of their positioning as Muslim women in the West. The multiple strategies the bloggers use and the topics they discuss make it difficult to pigeonhole them into any one reductive stereotype.

As the writing of this dissertation comes to a close, Islamophobia remains a major issue not only in Quebec but also across Canada and the United States (and in much of the rest of the Western world), perhaps most heatedly through some of the rhetoric being expressed by United States politicians and public figures as the 2016 elections draw near. With racism and Islamophobia ever present as a backdrop, it is crucial to continue to highlight the contributions of Muslim women and to challenge portrayals of Muslim women as universally brainwashed, oppressed, or violent.

Reflections on the research process

In this dissertation, I have examined the practice of *tafsir* through blogging as it takes place among Muslim feminist bloggers and their audiences. In Chapter 1, I situated personal blogs in relation to literature on alternative media and the public sphere, raising some of the theoretical questions that would arise throughout the dissertation, including issues of community, identity, and private vs. public. Chapter 2 linked these topics more directly with existing Muslim feminist scholarship and with the Muslim feminist blogs studied in this dissertation, looking at what might be comprised within a framework of *tafsir* through blogging, as the writers tell stories, read religious texts, share visual images

and audio recordings, and engage with their readers. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explored the questions raised in the first two chapters through looking at three different recurring topics on the blogs: menstruation, queer issues, and women's spaces in mosques. In each of these chapters, the bloggers negotiate issues related to gender, sexuality, and religion, and responded to reactions from their audiences. Their blog posts and their responses to comments demonstrate an ongoing and multipronged approach of *tafsir* through blogging as they tackle difficult and often emotionally-fraught questions in their religious communities. This Conclusion will look back on some of the issues raised in all of these chapters, with particular attention to questions of religious authority in the context of blogging, and to what happens when the authors might simply not have all of the answers.

I was fortunate within the process of conducting this research to find that all four of the bloggers I featured were supportive of the work I was doing and happy to offer their time for interviews and follow-up queries. The thoughtfulness and critical reflection that had initially drawn me to their blogs came through not only in their answers to my questions but also, in some cases, in blog posts they wrote subsequent to my interviews, when they had reflected on my own research at greater length. In Ify's case, as discussed on page 137, a question I posed in the interview about the drastically reduced frequency of her writing prompted a longer reflection in a blog post twelve days later about how a shift away from "black and white" thinking made her less active as a blogger (Okoye, 16 March 2014). My role here thus became not only that of a researcher analysing what Ify was publishing, but also that of an audience member whose questions extended the reflections she shared. One post by Shehnaz came in response a much more fully developed part of this research (see page 196), as she reflected on an academic conference paper in which I

had presented a preliminary version of what is now the first part of Chapter 3 (Orbala, 19 March 2015). In this case, my place as researcher also served as a public intervention into the field of Muslim feminism within which Shehnaz is also active, allowing us to cite each other as we continue to engage with questions of shared interest. I can only hope that the themes and questions raised in this dissertation will continue to prompt such thoughtful and provocative responses, whether on blogs or elsewhere.

Broadening the framework

The voices and perspectives raised in this dissertation are, in some ways, quite diverse: the age range spans approximately fifteen years; all four live in different cities; all four come from different ethnic backgrounds, representing Africa, Asia, and Europe; two are converts while two were raised Muslim; and there are differences in terms of sexuality and relationship status. As was noted in Chapter 2, even though these bloggers all identify as Muslim women, they occupy diverse social locations in other regards, meaning that their experiences as Muslim women often differ significantly from one another. As we have seen, these differences can play a prominent role in how the writers engage in *tafsir* through blogging. For example, both Ify and Kirstin point to their backgrounds as converts for having shaped their sense of what they can and cannot say in critiquing religious structures. Shehnaz notes the constraints she sometimes feels, as she balances her desire to publish her ideas and photographs with her feelings of connection and obligations to her Pashtun community. Nahida considers the oppression she faces as a woman in a patriarchal world in relation to the privilege she holds as a straight woman in a heteronormative and homophobic society. All four bloggers have experienced

Islamophobia, although it has looked significantly different for Shehnaz and Nahida, both women of colour of Muslim background who do not wear hijab, and Ify and Kirstin, converts who do wear headscarves. Kirstin's location as a white woman further differentiates her from Ify, who has experienced anti-Black racism within and outside of Muslim communities. When it comes to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, these four bloggers face different levels of risks, limitations, privileges, and opportunities. Although a more extensive intersectional analysis of the impacts of the bloggers' individual social locations is beyond the scope of this dissertation, such an exploration would further elucidate the role of writers' backgrounds and identities as they engage in religious interpretation as Muslim women in North America.

There are further differences that remain unrepresented in this dissertation. All four women come from Sunni backgrounds, leaving a number of sects unaccounted for: Twelver Shias, Ismailis, Ahmadis, Nation of Islam, and others. Stories of women under 19 (Nahida's age when she first began blogging) or over 40 are absent, as are women belonging to the incredibly large range of ethnic groups that this research project could not possibly encompass. Although Ify is Black and of Nigerian background, none of the bloggers shares the longer African-American heritage of one of the largest groups of Muslims in the United States, a community often left out of mainstream discussions about issues pertaining to United States Muslims. None of the women writes from the perspective of being disabled or transgender. All four have easy access to computers and internet connections, excluding women for whom regularly updating a blog would be much less practical or financially feasible. We could surely find other absences as well.

These absences are neither surprising nor necessarily a weakness; this dissertation was never meant to be representative of all North American Muslim women. At the same time, there is a danger that it may reinforce systemic exclusions, reproducing images of Muslims in North America as Sunnis who are either converts or of relatively recent immigrant background. More broadly, it raises the concern of whose interests may continue to be systemically marginalised in future research focusing on Muslim women's writing. In a dissertation that gives so much attention to narratives of experience, it is important to note that there are many other Muslim women's stories that are not covered here. Some women may experience their marginalisation from prayer spaces, for example, not only as gendered exclusion but also as inextricably connected to a climate of anti-Black racism or to inaccessibility of many mosques for wheelchair users. Such examples highlight the importance of considering the specific social location of the writer when examining narratives within each of the case studies.

In other words, while this dissertation opens up some questions to consider with regard to Muslim feminist blogging, it should not be seen as representative of *all* Muslim feminist bloggers, and there is certainly room for much more research that extends the present analysis. Even among the bloggers I did study, many topics remain largely unaddressed in this dissertation: for instance, the predominance of male speakers at Muslim events, pressures young Muslim women face to get married, stories of religiously-justified abuse, movements in support of women leading prayer. This range of topics could be further expanded with attention to Muslim feminist blogs that emphasise issues of disability, colonisation, racism, and so on, and to Muslim feminist blogs outside of North America.

While all four of the bloggers I studied have written about how their ideas and approaches to Islam have changed over time, all are relatively young. The question of evolution over time as part of *tafsir* through blogging could be explored in much more depth by looking at bloggers with a longer life history to look back on. While such writers are in the minority, they are present. For example, Koonj (<https://koonjblog.wordpress.com/>), a blog written by Shabana Mir, has existed since 2007 and is still active; in a recent post, she referenced her religious practices from 1992, when she wore a burqa and avoided listening to music (Mir, 20 June 2016). Sober Second Look (<https://sobersecondlook.wordpress.com/>), a blog that began in 2012, is written anonymously by a woman who converted to Islam in the early 1980s, and focuses on her experiences of sexism and misogyny within the “conservative” religious community in which she raised her children and lived for many years (A Sober Second Look, n.d.). Offering memories from decades during which Ify, Kirstin, Nahida, and Shehnaz were very young (or not yet born), these two bloggers tell stories of fighting sexism in Muslim communities at earlier times, reflect on their regrets from earlier moments in their religious lives, and remind readers that the hijab was already “so old and done” as a topic of discussion in the 1980s and 1990s (Mir, 20 December 2015). Blog posts reflecting on experiences from decades ago (especially in the case of Sober Second Look) raise new questions about how to read narrations of experience and memory over time, a potentially additional dimension of *tafsir* through blogging to be studied in blogs that are more oriented toward writing memories of the past.

Of course, it is not only Muslim feminist bloggers who develop their religious interpretations through their blogging practice. The framework of *tafsir* through blogging

could be further applied to an examination of Muslim women bloggers who do not identify as feminist, and those who identify as conservative or traditional. We might ask, for instance, how their use of personal narratives illustrates the meaning they find in their conservative religious understandings, and how they negotiate questions of authority differently from or similar to the feminist bloggers featured here. Expanding beyond Muslim communities, an examination of religious interpretations among feminist bloggers of other religious backgrounds would provide rich opportunities for comparing relationships to bodies, texts, communities, and authority in diverse religious settings.

Furthering the conversation on Islam and queer issues

I am making final edits to this dissertation in the wake of the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, a gay club where 49 people were shot to death in the early morning hours of June 12, 2016. Their killer was an American Muslim. Along with the debates about gun control, Islamophobia, and the shooter's own sexual orientation, the massacre also prompted numerous discussions about the intersections between Muslim and queer identities. Media articles have included first-person accounts of being queer and Muslim (Abdelhadi, 2016; Shawn Ahmed, 2016), interviews with queer Muslims (Misra, 2016; Darby, 2016; Nasser, 2016; Migdal, 2016; Morris, 2016) and pieces by straight Muslim allies condemning homophobia in their religious communities (T. Ahmed, 2016; Bremer, 2016). Other articles have tackled the place of queer sexualities in Islam (Sarwar, 2016; Kanji, 2016). One piece tackles the thorny question of the Qur'an's position on "being gay" as defined as an identity in a contemporary context, noting a range of positions and practices across Muslim societies (Mack, 2016). A widely-publicised statement signed by

more than 400 major North American Muslim scholars, religious leaders, and activists strongly condemns the attack and affirms the equality of all, while refusing to condone queer sexualities by appealing to “a strict Abrahamic morality” (“A Joint Muslim Statement on the Carnage in Orlando,” 2016).

The scale and scope of these recent widespread public discussions about the place of queer issues within North American Muslim communities and scholarship are unprecedented, as is the number of stories about queer Muslims being brought to light. The questions raised extend far beyond Orlando and reflect different tensions with regard to how Muslims should be engaging with issues of sexual diversity and discrimination. In light of these tensions, the engagements of the bloggers featured in this dissertation on the topic of queer issues take on particular relevance and timeliness, given that these are difficult and controversial questions within many religious (and other) settings. Their writing points to a range of strategies that Muslims are using in thinking through these issues, and to some of the ongoing questions arising in Muslim communities even without a major tragedy bringing these questions into mainstream media publications.

***Tafsir* through blogging and religious authority**

One prominent thread recurring in all of the topics examined in this dissertation is that of how authority is defined and who can hold it. The authority of the bloggers to express their religious opinions is frequently called into question, whether on the basis of their failure to refer to scripture for justification (as in Ify’s discussion of queer issues), their reluctance to simply accept what seems “clear” from particular *hadiths* (as in Kirstin’s discomfort with existing *fiqh* rulings around prayer while menstruating), or their lack of

authority to interpret religious texts even when they *do* use them as bases for their arguments (as in Ify's and others' discussions of women's place in mosques).

These questions about Islamic religious authority are sometimes linked to a narrow conceptualisation of what can be considered to have "Islamic" weight. Shahab Ahmed (2016) argues that, in comparison to other earlier Muslim communities, contemporary Muslims are disproportionately focused on engagement Text (that is, the Qur'an and *hadiths*) in defining what is "Islamic," to the exclusion, or at least the marginalisation, of Pre-Text (including reason, the unseen, and signs of God in the cosmos) and Con-Text (the accumulation of cultural and historical meanings of Islam at a given moment) (p. 515). Without using Ahmed's vocabulary directly, the bloggers incorporate both Pre-Text and Con-Text into the development of their ideas, along with their reading of canonical texts. Their work also echoes Kecia Ali's (2015) argument that it would be productive for Muslims to take inspiration from ethical systems, such as feminism, that are not directly rooted in (narrowly-defined) Islamic texts. They also appeal to what they frame as more universal notions of justice and equality, or to what "any caring human would do" (wood turtle, 30 May 2010), locating their ethical commitments as consistent with Islam but not exclusive to it. In looking at Ahmed's conceptualisation of the "Islamic," it is clear that what these writers are doing is far from unprecedented, as they weave personal narratives, visual images, and public conversations into their practices of religious interpretation. Their work is, however, a challenge to some of the discourses that dominate within Muslim communities today, and serves as an argument for understanding the "Islamic" to encompass more than what is strictly contained within explicitly religious texts. Thus, part

of their challenge to these accusations that they lack Islamic authority or legitimacy involves expanding the framework in which the “Islamic” nature of their ideas is evaluated.

Questions can also be raised about what authority accomplishes and how it shifts in the online environment, and in relation to blogging in particular. In her discussion of approaches to Qur’anic interpretations, Ayesha S. Chaudhry (2013) uses the category of “reform” approaches for approaches that do not claim to be rooted in any “traditional” schools of textual interpretation, and that place gender equality at their core. Chaudhry notes that while there might be a certain coherence to this position (as opposed to others that claim adherence to certain “traditional” methodologies that, she argues, cannot be reconciled with a fully gender equal position), the conscious rejection of the accepted “tradition” means that followers of this approach forfeit any image of legitimacy or authority they might have had within mainstream Muslim communities. On the one hand, this sacrificing of particular forms of legitimacy may appear to be a disadvantage facing these bloggers. The positions they take, for example, on queer issues, where all four bloggers leave the scriptural and legal texts out of the discussion almost entirely and base their arguments instead on personal stories and appeals to other ethical principles, may make their arguments easy to dismiss for those committed to particular text-based methodologies. This may, indeed, be a drawback for them, as the extent to which they can influence those with power in their religious communities may be limited.

On the other hand, the writers’ decisions to discuss these issues on their blogs may also allow them a certain freedom, and may even be a deliberate choice in order to write in a context where they are free to discuss issues in the ways that they choose. Given that blogging does not carry any monetary cost once one has access to the internet (which each

of these women did even before they began blogging), and that it is not regulated, the bloggers are not reliant on publishers for money or in order to maintain their platform, and nor are they dependent on any kind of community recognition in order to express their ideas and continue their blogs. As they are not necessarily speaking to anyone in their local community through their blog, and nor are they actively attempting through their blogs to gain any kind of power, the stakes are low as far as needing the validation of a particular audience to continue their work. As with other forms of alternative media, this format may allow the bloggers a much larger range of creative possibilities for the content and style of their writing than other platforms where writers are beholden to the desires of an editor or feel some obligation to adhere to methodologies seen as more “traditional.”

Perhaps more to the point, the bloggers *do* all have large readerships, many of whom comment regularly (or did so in the past, in the case of the blogs that are no longer active) to express their support and gratitude for what they write. As Heidi Campbell (2010) and others have written, blogging is one way that the internet is shaping and shifting conceptions of religious authority. It may be too simplistic, then, to suggest that the bloggers’ sometimes radical religious opinions put them in a position where they lack authority within Muslim communities; the issue may be instead that their following comes from somewhere other than a mainstream community. In fact, Kirstin told me in her interview that she has gotten people specifically contacting her for religious advice from as far away as Zanzibar and India. She noted that such questioners are coming to her, “a woman in Toronto with two kids,” rather than “a forum of male shaykhs,” referring to some of the more established Islamic question forums linked to (usually male) scholars with more formal religious credentials. Shehnaz noted somewhat incredulously that “I still get...

comments from like women saying, I want to marry – my boyfriend is Christian, can I marry him, and I’m like... I’m not a mufti [religious scholar qualified to issue *fatwas*], why are you asking me?” In both cases, the scholarly authority that comes from formal instruction in religious texts and an expertise in interpretive methodologies seems less important than the accessibility of the writers, perhaps especially for women wanting to feel their questions are heard. In this case, Shehnaz tried to distance herself from the notion that she was in a position to issue religious legal judgements on others’ lives. At the same time, many of the posts on her blog, in which she does make strongly-worded public claims that certain religious interpretations are either correct or incorrect, suggest a complicated relationship to her own sense of religious authority. Even as she may disavow any personal qualifications (or responsibility) for making specific Islamic rulings on particular cases, she nonetheless frequently publishes religious opinions, complete with supporting evidence from texts and from her own life. It is not entirely surprising, then, that readers may understand her to be in a position to answer their own more specific questions on similar themes.

Of course, even in cases where the writer is not considered to be in a formal position of religious authority, the expectations placed on writers by their audiences continue to have an impact. I do not mean to suggest that by removing themselves from dominant legitimacy-bestowing structures, these bloggers are thus entirely free and writing with no constraints. Shehnaz’s response to the suggestion that she should feel more comfortable sharing more “sexy” topics on her blog (Orbala, 19 March 2015) demonstrates that it is not only in response to religious or “conservative” voices that she feels a need to justify herself. We have seen examples throughout this dissertation of each of the bloggers deciding to

write, or not to write, particular things based on how they felt the audience would react, and writing publicly entails a certain level of awareness of one's public image. That said, the communities that have arisen through their writing on issues from menstruation to mosques suggest that legitimacy for these bloggers as Muslim women and feminists likely comes from sources other than those recognised as "traditionally" religious. Through their public interventions as alternative media projects, the bloggers also create counterpublic spaces in which alternative discourses can circulate and challenges to dominant forms of knowledge can be strengthened.

Muslim feminist claims and challenges

As Aysha A. Hidayatullah (2014) notes, Muslim feminists today can be understood to be at something of a crossroads, where they are reaching the limits of how far they can read feminist ideals directly from (or into) religious texts, and are thus need to reach for new strategies if they desire – as many do – to retain the value that both Islam and feminism hold for them. Through the ways they address difficult and controversial issues, the bloggers in this research encounter some of the roadblocks that Hidayatullah describes, where they describe the readings available to them as unethical or incompatible with what they have come to believe as women and as feminists. Their work also demonstrates strategies for moving beyond the impasse that Hidayatullah writes about, whether through digging further for new readings or understandings, an appeal to an innate (and God-given) sense of justice, or appealing to other values seen as praiseworthy in Islam.

Tafsir through blogging represents one of many ways that Muslim feminists in North America are developing and expressing religious interpretations, and inviting a wider

public – including fellow Muslim feminists as well as other Muslim and non-Muslim readers – into the conversation. In telling stories about their lives and their bodies, reinterpreting religious texts, sharing pictures and audio, and interacting with their audiences, these women intervene in existing debates and take their reflections in new directions. It would be a mistake, however, to see their actions as wholly new or to see the reframing of authority and appeal to uncertainty discussed in Chapter 4 only as a rejection of particular religious frameworks. In their efforts to make space for themselves in mosques and to challenge the exclusion of menstruating bodies from ritual practice, the writers are not simply resisting religious institutions and practices. They are also seeking ways into those spaces and practices that hold most meaning to them. When Shehnaz writes that “God is greater than our limited understanding” (Orbala, 21 December 2013), she attempts to reopen a debate (in this case, on queer issues) that many see as settled, by pointing to the limitations of dominant understandings while referring to God as the ultimate arbiter. In doing so, she echoes the centuries-old phrase “Allahu a’lam,” or “God knows best.” Thus, she and her fellow bloggers both challenge religious tradition and insert themselves into it, making use of the blog platform in diverse ways to develop and share feminist readings of Islam.

Blog Posts Cited

Note: Although comments left on the blogs by readers are cited individually according to the name of the commenter, I have not separately cited bloggers' comments on their own blog posts. In some cases, this would have resulted in multiple citations for the same writer on the same date; thus, to simplify in-text citations, I have indicated in the text when I am quoting from a comment rather than from the main body of the blog post, but have not cited the bloggers' own comments as individual comments.

Comments on blog posts

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