The Signs in Ourselves
EXPLORING QUEER MUSLIM COURAGE

written and compiled by
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with art and design by
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This is an illustrated wellbeing resource grounded in the stories of a dozen sexually diverse Muslims from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Inspired by verses 41:53 and 51:20-21, we explore how sexually diverse Muslims have cultivated and maintained an enduring connection to Allah despite community rejection. What have we known and experienced in our lives that has led us to Truth? Is there something in our understandings of the Divine that can help bring us all closer to the Source?

Accompanying these stories you'll also find four sidebars and 13 exercises for you to explore your own experience of the Divine. These exercises can also be used in safe collective discussions. Though allies may benefit from this work, it is first and foremost dedicated to queers off aith.

**About the Publication**

**Written and Compiled by:** Liy Yusof

**Illustration and Design:** Dhiyanah Hassan

**Notes:**

- Page 62: Tawhīd Paradigm for Human Rights, presented with permission from Dr. amina wadud.
- Page 75: Fourfold Portal of Rahma, presented with permission from Dr. Ghazala Anwar.

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**About CSBR:** The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) is an international solidarity network that supports the integration of a holistic approach to sexual and bodily rights as human rights across Muslim societies—through feminist knowledge building, strategic convenings, and strengthening activists’ capacities and resources.

CSBR publications aim to provide accessible content and scholarship to a wide array of audiences & stakeholders invested in gender justice and human rights. The information contained in this publication does not necessarily represent the views and positions of CSBR, unless explicitly stated.

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Contents

WELCOME
Writer’s Note - pg 1 | Artist’s Note - pg 3 | How to Read This - pg 6 | Note to Readers - pg 7

OUR ENVIRONMENTS OF TRUTH

EXPLORING DIVINE PRESENCE

LEARNING FROM TIME AND EACH OTHER
Letters to a Past Self - pg 79 | Lessons for Everyone Else - pg 89 | Imagine: The Futures We Dream Of - pg 92 | Gratitude: What Are We Grateful for Now? - pg 101 | Sidebar 4: Re-evaluating a Social Emphasis on Procreation and Proliferation - pg 86

Feedback
from the voices in this project

“This made me think a lot about so many things I never thought of before.”

“Thank you for providing this opportunity for queer Muslims to see we are not alone.”

“Answering the questions was very emotional for me.”

“Thank you for doing this. May Allah reward and guide us to the life we want.”

“I think this project will help LGBT Muslims immensely.”

“I can’t even imagine this project but thank you for having me be a part of it. This is going to be very cool and wonderful. May we keep doing beautiful things.”

“I really think religious queer Muslim spaces are important. I find much of queer Muslim organising is secular, and it’s frustrating. Sometimes I would prefer organising an interfaith queer space, because the God-consciousness is important to me above all. Thanks for doing this work.”

“Love this exercise: The experience of answering was like a spiritual journey: Thank you for the thoughtfulness in your questions.”

“Thank you so much for compiling my story. I hope my sharing helps give perspectives for others out there. God bless you.”

“I send love and peace to all.”

“Thank you, this was healing. May Allah bless you and your loved ones.”

“This is so dope! I’m saving my answers because reading them reminded me of the blessings I forgot I had.”

“Answering this makes me so incredibly happy. Thank you for asking questions that matter with such poise and tact. May all your proceedings go well, inshallah ameen.”

“It was a nostalgic experience. In a good way, it brought back memories of those years and reinforced the importance of doing more for others.”

“It’s really been a pleasure doing this! I think this is a beautiful project.”

“This project is really important. I’ve felt alone for a very long time. Everyone is going through their own journey, and I don’t want to burden others with mine. But I can’t do this on my own. I can’t do this on my own.”
Hi, I’m Liy!

If you’re reading this, then the wild beautiful idea that found words for itself while I was in a park sometime late 2019 is finally alive: A love letter to God, to all the queer Muslims who changed my life in years of navigating human rights spaces, and to the ones I haven’t met but I know are out there.

The sub-title and theme of this book comes from a post-it of mine that has stared back at me for two years: “Queer Muslim courage?” Like it was waiting for an answer. As I witness our resilience to find and make pockets of warmth away from pain, what comes up again and again for me is the idea of being a queer Muslim ancestor: What if we could approach queer Muslim collective care as being part of a whole generation that doesn’t want the next to feel they’re starting on empty like we did?

I also didn’t think I had queer Muslim elders until my 30s. I didn’t know who to turn to. What if we see it as care for the queer elders we’ll become, and trying our best to see as many of us get there?

Activism and allyship around queer/LGBT Muslim rights can only do so much if we inherently believe our identities exempt us from Divine love. Instead of expending energy countering what others say about us, we need to build our spirituality as a collective and reclaim access to (and authority of) the Divine.

Welcome
Our journeys have signs for all to learn from in explorations of compassion, faith, and identity. It was important to me to make a project about the strength to not let others kick us out of our faith while we heal from the trauma attached to it together. I saw an opportunity for an affirming wellbeing resource that could be just as useful downloaded to your bedroom or disseminated in a workshop anywhere in the world. This is a humble offering in that direction — and an excuse for me to talk about God with Muslims I relate to.

Notes on Methodology

There were two criteria for everyone’s participation: firstly that they identify as Muslim by choice even if made to feel ‘not Muslim enough’ by others, and secondly that they do not identify as a cisgender heterosexual person.

The conversations took place in a mix of English, Bahasa Melayu, and Bahasa Indonesia, and are presented here in English. I spoke with each of them for a few hours online during the 2020 pandemic and wrote all the way through the holy month.

Besides the dozen or so people I spoke to, you’ll also find brief answers from LGBT/queer people who self-identified with the participation criteria. They submitted their own answers to the interview questions online — a survey link was disseminated across a few networks, and we collected answers from 14 countries. Their responses anonymously accompany the Southeast Asian stories along with prompts for you to do the same, whether alone or with trusted people.

Each section has at least one sidebar with information and tools to accompany what emerged. We feature some work from South Asian scholar Dr Ghazala Anwar and Dr amina wadud, a specialist in textual analysis from a gender and sexuality inclusive perspective. Although the voices in this project skew to Southeast Asia, we believe it’s important to listen to South Asian and Black Muslim voices who incorporate gender and inclusivity in their praxis.

The youngest of us in this project is 15, and the oldest is in their 60s. Some of us were born into Muslim life, and some embraced Islam along the way. You’ll find stories from divorced mothers, Islamic studies scholars, and former atheists, among others. Some of us have been in loving relationships for over a decade, others have yet to encounter their first. I tried my best to hold their truth with care, and am excited to share their stories with you.

Artist’s Note

written by Dhiyanah Hassan

On Colour-Coded Text

From the Welcome section, the texts are colour-coded as such: black to represent the voice of the writer as they guide the reader through the sharings, brown for longer sharings from interviewed participants for this project, and green for the shorter sharings from survey participants. These colours were chosen for their earthy quality, providing different levels of contrast.

However for the last section, Learning From Time and Each Other, the text returns to all black. There is a shift in the narration here as the writer steps back to make space to focus on the stream of voices from the community. The writer jumps back in towards the end to support the reader in concluding their
journeys through this workbook.

For readers who don’t have access or use for colour-coded texts, all of the participants’ sharings are presented as quotes with “quotation marks,” so there’s still a distinction between the writer’s voice and the community’s voices. Visual cues have also been used within each section to help demarcate tonal changes between the varied sharings for a spacious and exciting reading journey.

On Art and Design

Every visual element you see in this book was digitally hand-drawn, including batik motifs, Qur’anic scripts featured in artwork, and patterns. Some elements have been inspired by references shared by participants of this project while others were derived from my research and personal explorations as a queer Muslim South and Southeast Asian artist. All portraits featured are intuitively imagined to maintain anonymity. The visual theme for this book echoes the Islamic five-times-a-day prayer ritual, signaling the Sun’s movement through the sky. Each prayer time is expressed through the frames’ colours and patterns on each page as the text flows like a river through them.

Throughout the book, you’ll find visual portals, echoes, and cues in the form of small and large illustrations that accompany the voices here. Larger artwork are featured on whole pages or as double spreads to act as meditative rest stops for the reader. In between each section are full-paged illustrations featuring a verse from the Qur’an. With Liy’s help, I’ve highlighted some verses from the range of Qur’anic references featured in the text — they act like keys unlocking the reader’s journey to the next section. The sequence for the visual theme is as follows:

We begin with Al-Fatihah and Fair-themed colors for the Welcome, an invitation for the reader to calibrate and awaken their senses. As the sun positions itself high in the sky for Zuhr, warm colors and motifs reminiscent of batik tampil greet us for Our Environments of Truth. This is a large section, with a pause in between for some encouragement from Surah Ash-Sharh. Then we walk into Asr for the second half of this section until we get to the cloudy twilight of Maghrib for Exploring Divine Presence. We’re heralded through this section with dreamy and mystical illustrations. Then the night blankets over the sky as we’re met with the last section, Learning from Time and Each Other. We conclude the book with Ayatul Kursi, the Throne verse (from Surah Al-Baqarah, Qur’an 2:255). This ayat is taught to Muslims by their elders or loved ones as one of the most powerful du’as, invoked for protection before sleep and as a potent reminder to trust in Source’s Divine will.

I present it here for those who resonate with it as a grounding prayer and an affirmation that these du’as are for queer Muslims, too.

The visual frame for the Sidebars was created with ocean-themed colors, like bodies of water that connect each section, turning this book into an archipelago of lived narratives. This, and the prompts for the Exercises are both presented with the same illustrated backgrounds to make them easily recognizable as you flip through the book for rereads and revisits.

Terms of Use

You may share and interact with the artwork for personal use only. You may engage with the art for personal viewing (e.g., as wallpapers for personal devices) and as inspiration and creative references for your personal and communal interactions with the exercises in this book. However, no aspect of the art or design element — in whole or in part — should be exhibited, manipulated, re-created, or redistributed for use in any materials for sale or commercial purposes.

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While you are encouraged to get creative with how you hold space for this book and its content, these boundaries are here to support us in articulating, honoring, and respecting the creative and communal labour that went into the creation and publication of this wellbeing resource.
How To Read This

In the interest of representing diversity in anonymity, each response is tagged with any two of the following identifiers: **Age, gender, sexual orientation, location, and job.** Their pronouns are also included so you can refer to them in collective discussion.

I preserve the names and pronouns people choose for Allah as much as possible, including the gender-neutral ‘Dia’ in Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia. The voices in this project refer to themselves as ‘LGBT Muslims’, ‘queer Muslims’, and more. I refer to them as ‘sexually diverse Muslims’ wherever possible, building on the idea that human diversity is just another form of divinely granted biodiversity. In my opinion at the time of writing, the term also easily includes people who are intersex, asexual, neurodivergent and more.

Non-English words are not italicised. Italicising is a practice typically indicating a word is foreign, when the reality is that everyone who is a part of this project speaks at least 2-3 languages and English is often the most foreign of them all. With well over a billion Muslims around the world, I consider that listing the 14 countries of the anonymised voices in this project does not do much to express the complexities of migration, sociopolitics, and race we face in Muslim-majority and minority contexts. I thought it would be interesting to instead share the non-English languages of the voices in this project, considering everyone in it is at minimum bilingual:

Text in illustrated word-cloud is arranged from large to small according to most frequent to least. Alt text: Bahasa Melayu, Urdu, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Punjabi, Spanish, Javanese, Bangla, French, Mandarin, Russian, Sundanese, Polish, Minang, German, Hijra Farsi, Farsi, Armenian.

Remember that the core of the project is storytelling from people who want to be heard. Above all, this resource is a humble collection of real stories to help you feel less alone and imagine ways forward in your own journey. I hope you remind yourself that each story may take minutes to read, but took years to live out.

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Note to Readers
written by Dhiyanah Hassan

Before you begin, please note that throughout this document, there will be detailed sharing of lived experiences from queer Muslims — difficult and traumatic narratives weaved in with the inspiring and the mundane.

It is important that the reader **acknowledges their own capacity** before engaging with this text, and to continue to check in with themselves while reading, exploring, or discussing (also checking in with each other if in group discussion).

As you read this, you will be holding space not just for these voices, but also for what these narratives reveal, represent, and reflect within you. This might mean you may experience triggers in the form of re-living or remembering personal traumas, seeing specific challenges in others that may shock you, or even experiencing ideological resistance to the diverse experiences presented here, spiritual or otherwise.

**This is a project founded on Love.** So please, be kind to you. Ensure that you are able to engage in self-care or seek support whenever you need to.

We invite you to not deny or reject your responses toward what you may discover or encounter here, and we equally invite you to extend whatever grace and kindness you wish on yourself both to your own well-being as well as to the voices of the queer Muslims presented here.

Thank you for reading. And if you can go no further for now, **thank you for honouring your capacity.**
Our Environments of Truth

Articulations of Sexual Diversity

What do we know to be true about ourselves? In this section, we hear from those who are finding the language to describe their gender, their identity, the people they want to love, and set the location for their story. Look out for the first two exercises in this book, which invite you to introduce yourself to the conversation.

THE EXPERIENCE OF GENDER AS A FLUID PROCESS

When she was a child, she was certain she would grow up into a man. "I just thought it would naturally happen on its own. This was before I knew anything about queer or trans narratives. When it didn’t, when I got my first period, I felt so disconnected from my body."

At 30, she is still investigating how to articulate the full range of her gender experience, but has more language for it now: "I see it as a triad of masculine, feminine, and androgynous aspects that are in constant dialogue with each other through language, intentions, and expression. What surprises me to this day is how healing my relationship with gender and body has allowed me to find a safe home in the body I have now — the body of a woman. So while my experience of gender is multiple and fluid, I hold no conflict over being seen as a cis woman."
“I was born in a female body, and am still occupying my female form. So by the definition of Trans, that makes me Trans-man, though I could do without the suffix ‘man’ because I rationalise that feeling like a man doesn’t make one a man, rather I like to define Trans as being able to flow back and forth between masculinity and femininity in a way that perhaps is incomprehensible to most. Trans feels like an intertwining of energies to me, and I seem to imbue masculinity. If anything, being able to identify as Trans has allowed me to fully embrace my femininity too, and I quite frankly love it.” (28, Bangladesh, he/him)

“I have zero attraction to women. I used to identify as a cis man, but a lot of things have changed in the past year, a lot more self-discovery. I’m still masculine presenting, but now my sense of gender is not the same — some of these labels I’ve always used don’t fit anymore. I know someone who was a pre-op trans man, and realised they felt no longer cis nor trans. They now go by genderfluid. I feel the same way.” (25, Singapore, he/him)

DISCOVERING THE LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE OURSELVES

Although many of us have clear words to describe our sexual orientation, such as ‘lesbian’, the discrimination we face at large in our societies is often put upon us as a whole using the term ‘LGBT’. Some people therefore use ‘LGBT Muslims’ to identify themselves — often extending the acronym to represent more people, and some use ‘queer Muslims’ for many strategic reasons. In Southeast Asia, the use of ‘queer’ appears to be fairly recent, increasing in popularity, and does not struggle as much with a derogatory origin as it does in North America or Europe.

She used to refer to herself as a lesbian, but now prefers to identify as a queer woman, even if it brings up some intergenerational conflict. “The word queer is very linked to my cultural spiritual journey in Indonesia, so I feel more comfortable to call myself that instead of lesbian. A lesbian activist from the ‘90s said to me that we cannot use ‘queer’, because we need a clear definition to the state about who we are. Are we lesbian? Are we gay? We cannot say we are queer. I said, why not? Her thinking was that it would confuse the state and delay our cause. But to me, the word queer is something I can use to keep thinking critically, to question and discuss my identity. In spaces where I cannot openly express my connection between my sexual orientation and spirituality, I can use the term queer to address myself.”

“I’ve dated men before. When I started dating women, I felt I had to choose or identify as a lesbian, and that has gone on for a while because of how long my current relationship is. I had to remind myself that how I identify is not based on what people think I should be. My current struggles are around sexual orientation more than gender identity.” (38, cis woman, she/her)

“I first identified as bisexual, and then queer, and now lesbian. I realised that while I’m not completely closed off to dating nonbinary people and trans men, I’m definitely most attracted to androgynous womyn. I have a very specific type! But I didn’t want to directly identify as lesbian at first. The label felt so heavy. Was I limiting my queerness because of misconceptions about nonbinary and trans people? I couldn’t get myself to say ‘I am lesbian’ for so long. I would say I was bisexual or pansexual because the word lesbian felt so negative and loaded for me. But I’ve since come to terms with it.” (31, Masters student, she/her)

“Although I am sexually bisexual, I politically identify as a queer lesbian. “ (teacher, France, she/her)

“While the word queer has been widely reclaimed among LGBT people and is even used by cis het people to refer to LGBT persons, there are still many people including myself who are uncomfortable with the word. “ (27, Malaysia, she/her)

“I was assigned female at birth but I feel like intellectually and emotionally I am somewhere in the middle of the male to female spectrum. I identify as a lesbian, but find the term queer just more relatable. It sounds..."
“My gender identity makes it hard for me to strictly identify as bisexual or pansexual, so I just call myself queer. I have met and loved enough women to know that I am not one, yet I don’t see myself in manhood. My expression is neutral unless I decide on a feminine or masculine costume, but because of my body I am perceived as a woman and experience their oppression. Recently, I discovered that I am on the spectrum. Adult autism is very misunderstood especially in people coded as women, but studies have shown that people on the spectrum are likely to identify as queer because they are less responsive to social expectations or constraints. For me, discovering that was liberating. But due to multiple layers of stigma against both autism and queerness, I rarely bring it up with others.” (33, nonbinary, they/them)

“I prefer the term ‘queer’ because I’m a bit tired of the joke pansexuals get: ‘So you’re sexually attracted to pans, like cooking pans?’ Lord help us all.” (30, genderfluid femme, she/they)

**THE HOME OF OUR CONVERSATIONS**

He describes the struggle between Malaysia’s progressive principles and conservative implementations. “Theologically, Malaysia is from the Sunni school of thought, so Ahl Sunnah Wal Jamaah is the big umbrella. Most Southeast Asian countries subscribe to the Ashaerah Maturidiyah school of theology.

“In terms of fiqh or jurisprudence, Malaysia is Shafii (Shafeeyah). Our Federal Constitution is very secular and liberal. The Malay royalty disagreed to put Islam as the religion of the federation when called upon by the drafters of our constitution, in order to maintain the secular characteristics of this country.

“That’s why there are three cases I can think of, one even from 1988, where the consensus was that Malaysia cannot be interpreted as an Islamic country, because Islam in the constitution is restricted only to ceremonial traditions and was expanded throughout the years by the courts. So from a constitutional perspective, we are democratic and liberal in principle.

“But the problems arise in implementation. The bureaucracy and our civil servants make that difficult with a very conservative implementation. In our political conditions, we are a traditional conservative society that is very patriarchal and heteronormative. In Malaysia we generally use politics of identity, centering the Malay identity, Muslim identity, and heterosexual identity.”

They moved 300km away from Kuala Lumpur to rebuild a life away from an abusive family by living amongst ancestors. “Penang is a place I chose to live in to be closer to water. It’s also my only ancestral land in this country. I didn’t know why that was important to me before, seeing as how I don’t feel connected to my biological family or to how Islam is practiced here in the mainstream Malay culture, but I believe places are alive with their own personalities — personalities informed not just by history, structure, or people, but informed also by the guardians and ancestors who lived and tended on the lands from ages past.

“Being here, being able to hear and feel my ancestors more keenly
- like feeling the same waters that my ancestors felt when they first landed here - has played a crucial role in developing a healthier relationship to my spirituality. It’s taught me not to deny the validity of my experiences — to view the past as fertiliser for possibilities and potential.

She points out that Islam’s unique integration into the Nusantara region. “Before Islam arrived to what we now call Indonesia there were already many faiths: animism, Hinduism, Buddhism. The people of the Nusantara region have specific beliefs and traditions which they’ve preserved even until today. Islam interacts with these beliefs in Indonesia by adapting through cultural assimilation. In Central Java, you can see interactions between Islamic architecture and Hinduism.

“I would say that ‘Islam Nusantara’ emerged as a notable idea in 2014, as a way to describe an Islam that is different from an Arab-dominated Islam in the Middle East. I don’t have a Middle Eastern context in my faith at all, even our clothing is different.”

Part of that integration was the rise of pesantren culture as an Indonesian social institution. He grew up in one of these Islamic boarding schools where God was a social experience.

“The term pesantren existed before Islam did in Indonesia, as places to learn about spirituality and religious philosophies. There are now pesantrens at all levels in the education system and they are a very important social institution — what makes our learning culture unique is how we localise religion.

“In the pesantren, people practice Islam and locality simultaneously rather than with an Arabised framework or culture. There is a shifting trend now where women leaders wear the hijab, but historically, pesantren leaders didn’t do this and still practiced Islam in a localised way.”

He is a tutor who lives with his parents and volunteers for Singaporean collectives involving Muslim welfare, Muslim youths, and queer people. “Singapore is really secular, so the concept of God is non-existent in the public sphere. Religion is talked about, but God is not.

“The government doesn’t care if you are Sunni or Shia. Muslims are a minority in Singapore, but a sizable one. There are multiple layers to our minority-ness. Since we are a cosmopolitan island, we have Indian Muslims, Chinese Muslims, Iranian Muslims, Muslims from many sects, but all of them are not acknowledged much.

“All talk of ‘Singaporean Muslims’ tend to refer to Malay Sunni Muslims, the face of Muslims in Singapore. Non-Sunni non-Malay Muslims are probably sidelined the most, even if they are not legally discriminated against — with the exception of Ahmadi Muslims who are not legally considered Muslim and can’t be buried in Muslim cemeteries in Singapore.

“The tensions are internal, and repercussions exist within their bubbles. There is a tendency for Singaporean Malay Muslims to think of Islam as only what they know — ‘Why would Islam be different with Indian Muslims? It’s just one Islam what?’ — without realising cultural influences are very different.

“For example, the pressures Indian Muslim women face at home in Singapore are radically different from what Malay Muslim women face at home. But overall, I’d say Muslims in Singapore are relatively grateful to be in Singapore since they feel better
taken care of than in Muslim-majority countries in the region. Traditionally, spokespeople for Muslims in Singapore have been conservative, but our most recent mufti has some impressive training in social sciences and so far doesn’t seem to lean to pure ritualistic religious dogma.

She is a schoolteacher and single mother trying to make space for the voices of sexually diverse Muslims in Singapore. “Muslims from different sects are seen as equal because that’s what the government wants. A secular government does help to maintain peace and harmony, but between the layers there’s a lot of discrimination for LGBT people.

“In the statistics from the religious authorities two years ago, 56% of Singaporean Muslims are against LGBT rights. There is a tension between religious authority bodies feeling threatened by queer rights, as if they are competing in terms of religious harmony.

“The government is trying to comply with all sides. I understand they might feel squeezed between this, but I know their work is trying to find middle ground where intersectionality works better. It’s not easy though but at least something is being done.

“As a queer Muslim I’ve been invited to closed-door sessions with Muslim authorities to share my perceptions of Islam, and I’ve been in arguments where Muslims believe that LGBT people are resourceful and don’t need support. To many, LGBT Muslims are the ones causing problems and the only way to resolve that problem is to heal through conversion therapy!

“As someone who’s been through conversion therapy twice, I always get so angry to hear that. The reason why LGBT people are resourceful is to survive, and even then, minority non-Chinese Muslims are struggling like s***! For straight people to think the only way for us is to heal, is to continuously associate us with sex. Straight Muslims get to define what our healing is! Doesn’t that sound supremacist?”

He made a home in London 10 years ago in diaspora, after living and working in Malaysia for most of his life. “Compared to the rest of the UK, I think London is a pretty good place to be for a queer Muslim. We have a Muslim mayor now who is demonstrably pro-LGBT. Having said that, there are significant pockets of racism, Islamophobia and, to a lesser extent, homophobia and transphobia. However, the rest of the country is probably more hostile to Muslims and ethnic/gender/sexual minorities. We have the controversial ‘Prevent’ counter-terrorism strategy, which divides Muslim communities. It puts them under severe scrutiny, and part of that process is pitting Islam and LGBT rights as seemingly irreconcilable ways of being.”

DESCRIBING OUR MUSLIM SOCIETIES

I’ve left out the country names from answers we received from around the world in this section, as an invitation to reflect in which ways our experiences are shared or unique.

“In my state there’s a small population of Muslims. Its community is defined by cultural aspects, eg. Bosnian, Malay. This limits the interaction between the larger Muslim population and particularly for reverts like me, due to language barriers and feeling like an outsider. Over the last decade or so, racism and Islamophobia have increased, leading to attacks and general hostility towards Muslims.” (gay, trans man, he/him)

“I can’t say that Muslims are a majority population here, but there is a huge Muslim community. Muslims here have interactions within their identity, so my experiences are from growing up around a South Asian Muslim community.” (18, cis woman, she/her)

“My country is considered secular and Muslim-majority. People and authorities mix laws and Islamic traditions together a lot. None of them really refer to the Quran, or they do so in a confusing vague way. Our society is challenging a lot of increasing Islamic radicalisation and secular extremism at the same time.” (31, single mother, she/her)

“I live in a country that believes Islam is the sole true faith. It can be said that conservative Muslims believe that Islam is the religion that all citizens must adhere to, and it is the largest religion in the country.” (27, bisexual, she/her)

“Muslims make up the majority, and fall on a vast spectrum of ‘piety.’ Islam here tends to be governed by rules that are mostly interpreted by men, quite conservative but can be secular.” (bisexual, cis woman, she/her)

“There is a precarious peace between religions here, but definitely an enthusiasm for the patriarchal version of Islam: women are the root of all evil, the list of absurd sermons are endless. It’s gained a disturbing amount of precedence over the years.” (28, trans, he/him)
“A Muslim-majority country, mostly Sunni Muslims. There is little to no acknowledgement of any other Islamic sect or religion.” (30, cis woman, she/her)

I live in a predominantly Muslim country. Our ideas and views are shaped in a structured and rigid conformist way. Our relationship with God was as a collective, especially growing up in a male-dominated society. I never formed a one-on-one relationship with God until recently. Otherwise, Islam here has a very heteronormative, fundamentalist religious structure.” (nonbinary, monitoring and evaluation consultant, they/them)

“Many people here are homophobic and/or transphobic. But I’m a hijabi and present pretty femininely, so people just think I’m straight and definitely cis. At least one of the two things is true!” (27, bisexual, she/her)

“The perception of some Muslims in this country is that LGBT is a western concept. I think they should read history. Same-sex and genderqueer traditions build from Asia as well, in fact a lot of it grows here and passes through to Middle Eastern countries and then to the West. So there’s a lot of education that still needs to be done to surface that.” (lesbian, schoolteacher, she/her)

EXERCISE 2

Collective Discussion:

In groups, discuss how to describe the interaction of Islam with politics, geography, and history in your country to Muslims from other countries. Make time for presentations from each country or community. This could be a great opportunity to unpack stereotypes and increase your understanding of different social contexts.

Personal:

Reflect on your reactions to the previous answers. Which ones feel familiar and why? Is it easy or hard to guess which countries they are from, and why?
Sidebar 1: 

Women as Authorities and Producers of Islamic Knowledge

This sidebar emerged out of my notes from attending spaces organised by everyone mentioned in it. While recognising that multiplicity, I decided to give the story a focus point by wandering through it with a key witness, Professor amina wadud. As sexually diverse Muslims take shape as a collective presence in this generation, I feel it is important to recognise that the struggle to decriminalise sexual diversity from within an Islamic framework holds hands with the intergenerational struggle for democratisation of authority and justice for women.

Have you ever felt sandwiched between choosing Islam without full and equal rights, or feminism but without Islam, and thought to yourself: There must be more than this?

The prominent scholar amina wadud found herself in a similar situation, except the year was 1995. The author of the first Qur’anic exegesis by a woman scholar critically reading for gender equality was in Beijing witnessing governments of the world adopt the UN Beijing Declaration for gender equality. There, a caucus of gender activists were polarised into two camps that ironically held the same core belief — that one cannot have both Islam and human rights. Both sides relied on uncritical definitions of Islam that presume male privilege. “In 1995, I was still part of the confusion,” amina wadud said at a conference years later.

“I was not a feminist at the time. If I had to be locked into a discourse between feminism and Islam, I would choose Islam! But the secularists were confounded by the possibility of equality through Islam, because of hegemonic Islamist articulations of Islam. I didn’t want to accept that definition of Islam either. The real eye-opener for me was: Who is defining Islam, and how are they defining it? What are the sources for those definitions? This is when the possibility for Islamic feminism can take place — because when you take agency with regard to the definitions of feminism and the definitions of Islam, you are no longer dependent on somebody else’s definition.”

Southeast Asia was where she saw a middle path on human rights and formal Islamic knowledge develop.

“I came to Malaysia 30 years ago and worked with the women who would become Sisters in Islam and Musawah because I did not find in my own circumstances — in the US or the MENA region — this cooperative collaboration between formal Islamic knowledge and human rights work to the extent demonstrated here in this region.”

Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a Malaysian organisation born from regular study sessions in the late 1980s between a group of professional women in one of their living rooms. They wondered: If God is just, if Islam is just, then why do laws and policies made in the name of Islam cause injustice?

They went from writing letters to the newspaper, to working on family law reform, to taking public positions on freedom of religion and expression by the end of the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, they were organising meetings with scholars and women’s rights groups globally. They launched Musawah, a movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family in 2009, involving collaborative work between women in several countries that has been going strong despite multi-state persecution of women activists.

One of their approaches is to politically challenge the codified asymmetry based on specific Qur’anic passages by proposing to codify symmetry on the basis of other reciprocal passages.

“It has the comprehensive capacity to rebuild through text to another location in actual communities,” says amina wadud. “We wanted to try to remove it from the idea that every time we talk about feminism or gender equality, that somehow you must have got it outside of Islam, and in Islam we have our own understanding. That’s usually kind of a doublespeak in order to prevent critical examination of the extent of which gender inequality is a construct, and therefore we also have the possibility to construct gender equality.”

One of the methodologies used by SIS, Musawah, and others in this region in developing their collective knowledge is to consider the reality of gendered experiences as part of tafsir. amina wadud says, “If Islam is just — and Islamic intellectual history says Islam is just — and the Muslim woman does not experience that justice, then there’s a disconnect in policy, a disconnect between an expression of equality and the continual participation in inequality.

“We must prioritise the lived realities of the woman’s experience, because it has to matter when we talk about the perfection or beauty of Islam. Coming to this context and being challenged by how lived realities impact on the phenomena of interpretation and implementation was one of the most beautiful things that happened to me.”

A clear example of incorporating women’s lived realities was in the first Indonesian women ulama congress (KUPI) in 2017. The congress arose from a need for a different fatwa forum where women were the full subject of fatwa.

After much discussion, KUPI’s inaugural congress made the following declaration: Sexual violence is haram both inside and outside of marriage. Protecting nature from any damage including environmental destruction in the name of development is wajib. Preventing children from any dangerous marriage is wajib, including child marriage. The forum explored a new paradigm of understanding Islam and fatwa production: They took into account women’s biological experiences, their stories of injustice, the state constitution, and scientific knowledge.
Some of the women ulama of KUPI not only understood the texts very well, but experienced child marriage themselves. KUPI demonstrated that bringing women’s experiences into fatwa production can result in more thoroughly-considered outcomes. Their declaration had considerable impact: It was a factor for the change of the Indonesian minimum age of marriage from 16 to 19; the Ministry of Religious Affairs approved a proposal for a mechanism of producing more women ulama; the KUPI network was involved in national modules on marriage courses and consulted by the government on issues of female genital mutilation and drafting laws to eliminate sexual violence.

As KUPI’s success story was presented to a global conference of Muslim women activists, amina wadud reminded them: “The task of respect and cooperation between formal Islamic knowledge and human rights work was not easy. We had many roadblocks along the way. But in the end, strategically, it became the most efficient and effective ways of addressing certain problems.

“In my travels since those 30 years, I have yet to experience this outside of Southeast Asia. Maybe people might want a KUPI of their own in the MENA region, but the work has to be done on the ground. The work to produce it is work that doesn’t just start with the mandate of gender equality. It has to start with the idea of raising human dignity.

“I think Indonesia and Malaysia are in a unique position in the way to be able to share that, particularly with Indonesia’s pesantren system which already includes women’s leadership in place. There is no separation between knowledge and activism, and knowledge and human rights. And yet, you have to kind of hammer out the rough spots in both to get a dynamic collaboration. Unfortunately, a lot of liberal articulations of Islam disregard the significance of Islamic knowledge history. If we say we want it, we have to examine the ways we are making it happen or preventing it from coming about.”

I’ll close this sidebar with this quote in my notes from amina wadud, who is currently invested in normalising the dignity of diverse Muslims: “In our time, diversity is the challenge to our current realities. For me — in terms of Islamic theology and ethics — the question of how we deal with sexual diversity in the Muslim community will be the ethical question of our time.” To explore her Islamic framework for resisting all forms of oppression, visit ‘Sidebar 2: The tawhidic paradigm for human rights.’

So truly with hardship there is ease. With hardship there is ease. Surah Ash-Sharh, Qur’an 94:5-6
Daily Life, Challenges, and Priorities

In this section, a young woman decides to leave all that she has known behind in search of love, and a man brings his collection of classical texts to face a mufti in person. Zooming in from the big picture in the earlier exercises, the third exercise of this book invites you to go in detail about your time, your challenges, and your current priorities. Curious about what really matters to other sexually diverse Muslims right now? We close this section with a few of their answers.

LOOKING FOR CONNECTIONS TO THE DIVINE

When she was a child, she was only allowed to leave the house for daily Qur’an class at the neighbour’s, and struggled to imagine a God who loved. “It was hard to communicate with my parents, because my mother was so protective and didn’t allow me to interact with my neighbours.

“My parents never told me about who or what God is, they always referred instead to my obligations. I must fast and pray, for example, if not God will be angry or distant from me. I do my obligations to be closer to God and get rewarded, otherwise there will be punishment. When I was small, I remember reading books about hell that had graphic pictures of people with their tongues stretched and cut repeatedly because they were liars in this world. In a way, I tend to remember God through this hell and punishment framework in childhood, rather than God as a being who loved me.”

“She loved her community, but she was lonely. She couldn’t talk about her sexuality with anyone. “I totally could not discuss this. My friends kept talking about their opposite-sex crushes, but I felt attracted to women, and there was simply no discussion about it within my Muslim community. It was difficult for me that I could not talk about it with anyone.”

In high school she finds connection and an understanding of God in a community of Muslims she met after class. “I learned the Quran and Islam from them. They weren’t as strict as my school’s community. I felt comfortable with them because we could discuss things like philosophy, which my school halaqah avoided and called a western innovation.

“We discussed many controversial issues and topics I had never encountered before. We talked about how to understand God through critical thinking.

“I was very attached to them. I felt really happy to find these people and speak my own thoughts, after problems doing this at home with my family.

“Although my mother and father provided financial support, they could not be good friends to me. In my Muslim community, however, I was empowered, I had many friends, I could speak and even debate.”

At 19, she runs away from home to another state, and lives precariously for a few years until a lesbian organisation flew her to Jogjakarta for safety from targeted homophobia. She decides to go to college.

“I was chatting with lesbian women online in an mIRC channel, and finally could share what I felt. Furthermore, I felt so distant from my parents because they thought I had become a rebel because of my Muslim community activities. It led me to decide that I had to leave, and so I fled my home and left my community behind. I didn’t want to contact my parents until I was safe because I wanted to be self-sufficient. They were upset that I left home, but supported my decision to study.”

However, when she tries to reconnect with her Muslim community from back home, it doesn’t go as well. “I still had their numbers. I reached out to three people I felt very attached to, and two of them told me directly: No, we don’t want to associate with you anymore, because you’re now a lesbian feminist. These people were like siblings to me, and they completely cut me off. The rejection was overwhelming.”

In inclusive spaces, she still could not talk about God, and her sense of disconnection continued. “It was like the opposite of the community back home. My LGBT friends were open to discussing almost everything, even sex positions and orgasms. But when I nominated a question about God for the discussion group, they said we can’t talk about God here. I felt even more rejection and disconnection. Ten years ago, the LGBT community was not used to talking about reconciling Islam with sexuality. I needed to read more on my own because I could not discuss it with my friends.”

She reflected on the rejection from her Muslim community. “When they rejected me, I remember wondering: Why was I rejected? One of the first things we learned together was iqra’ and the importance of reading. The Prophet decided to change his society after he left his cave, so the idea of Islam as societal change is very connected to God in my Muslim community. Yet they rejected me for my identity, even though we explored so many Quran verses about thinking for yourself. Why is it when I am different, they cannot open a discourse about it with me? Isn’t that part of
critical thinking?

She wondered where God was. "I never thought that God saw me differently, but I did feel that I was losing my connection to God through community. And I felt that I could only connect with God in community. In community, I can learn about God, and feel God is with me and my friends. So when my Muslim community rejected me, I was confused.

"Where is God now? I could not figure it out. In Jogjakarta, I volunteered for a women's network. They invited Irshad Manji and a Catholic lesbian priest to a panel. Those meetings cheered me up — finally, there are people talking about this! They may not be from Indonesia, but they discussed faith and spirituality with me. From there, I began feeling a connection to God again."

Now she spends time with herself exploring different ways of connecting to the Divine, including eating meat-free. She is a freelance researcher living alone and building a connection to plants. "I burned out a few years ago from working 9-5 and now I'm a freelance researcher mainly for women and LBT non-profit organisations, as well as a local activist fund. I research based on their needs, and it's fun.

"I live alone. I've just moved to a new place, with more space to cook and more sunshine through my window. My father lives 3 hours from me and I travel once a month to visit him. I'm in a long-distance relationship with someone in another part of Indonesia — we've been together for half a year and we're both Muslim. I also like to meditate, sing, and play guitar and ukulele. I write a lot.

"I began journalling seriously last year as a way for me to realise my feelings and heal. I remember what the Prophet said to Abu Bakar when they were hiding in the cave because people had driven them away — Don't be sad, Allah is with us (9:40). I believe that God in the universe takes care of me, so I must be good to myself. The most important thing for me right now is to connect with myself more. Doing that means that I can have a connection with people and other things. I also realised I never had any connections to plants or nature my entire life. So now my current interest is growing plants. YouTube has been my teacher! I am happy to learn, try slowly, and I'm starting to connect with them. They are a part of my journey of what I need to connect with to heal."

She finds a sense of connection to the Divine in a more balanced sense of spirituality that leads her to redefine her understanding of love. "The word love is quite tricky for me. Maybe because of how I experienced people's ideas of love. For example, my mother was very protective, and she called that love.

"What comes to mind is that I experience God's love for me when I can do things without a deep expectation to reciprocate. Maybe because I've craved attachment and community for so many years of my life, that it made me not clearly see God's love. So I try to slowly release those feelings."

"I feel more relaxed when I don't push myself into feeling this way or that way, just because I want to feel intimacy with this person or that person. When I meditate, I pray for people I don't know at all, instead of just the ones I love.

"My friends who facilitate collective meditations say that thinking of a shared experience with everyone can reduce attachment. Sharing something reduces its power over you. There's a relief in that process. In that moment I feel, this is how I can get love from God — if I can call it love."

CHALLENGING HATRED WITH KNOWLEDGE

When a recording of an event he was a panelist in appeared years later, framed with a headline targeted directly at him — "something like: Lawyer says al-Quran does not prohibit homosexuality!" — it brought on death threats and job loss. "I was in Indonesia at the time attending KUPI, the inaugural Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama, and when I came back I was surprised to see the news coming in. Every day there was something — in text chains, news portals, social media. I taught fiqh jurisprudence classes in a few universities and gave talks in mosques. Those were all cancelled. My contracts were terminated because of this piece of media. I received death threats on social media, texts with my home address and family's names."

He had been around long enough to know who was behind it. "An ultra-conservative Islamist NGO was part of this, and I confronted them online with an offer to meet in person to explain what I presented those years ago. They refused my invitation and deleted their posts. I confronted them that I come from a traditional conservative background, not in rights activism. I teach in mosques, I know how to read texts. It's a different world. I personally don't like being labeled liberal. It makes it hard for me to occupy these traditional spaces that I have always been a part of."

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And so he met the mufti. "I brought all my kitabs and books with me. I pointed out to him where I said everything I did, to prove that it was not something I made up, or even really original thought. He validated my proofs, but his advice was to not share any of it publicly. It would confuse people, he said. But the way I see it, everything is already on the Internet. Isn’t it better to hear it from someone with training like me?"

What is most important to him now? “In the language of pesantren or scholars, we call it Khadim al-Turath. Khadim means servant, so this means being a servant of religious texts. My doctoral thesis is about the fiqh of minority, specifically the permissibility of transgender reassignment surgery. My priority now is to write and speak about how to reconcile sexual and gender identity with faith. Especially among us Muslims. And I know this will take a long time. When we work to reconcile sexual and gender identity with religious texts, it’s a struggle. I think in my lifetime we won’t get there yet. But at least I can sit and talk about our understanding of religion and God.”

EXERCISE 3

Personal:

- What can you share about how you spend your time?
- How would you describe the challenges you face in your location and context?
- What is really important to you now?

Collective Discussion:

Share your day-to-day reality in a conversation. Some questions to ask each other in a safe space:
- Are you a student? Do you work?
- Are you in a relationship? How are your living conditions? What challenges do you face and what are your current priorities? Discuss any patterns you notice in the group.

WHAT IS REALLY IMPORTANT TO YOU RIGHT NOW?

- "Moving out of my childhood home so I can be myself and live how I want." (29, Malaysia, she/her)
- "Trying not to relapse." (19, lesbian, she/her)
- "Finding a job and being employed so I can leave my family and escape their pressure for me to marry." (33, Bangladesh, he/him)
- "Having a true, fearless life of my own." (33, Qatar, he/him)
- "Letting go of my anger. People tell me I am good-hearted, but can a good heart also be an angry heart? I’d like to release my anger and channel it productively. I want to show my family the love and kindness I can express to my friends. I don’t want to be a cog in the machine that doesn’t stand for anything. I want to be part of actual, tangible change towards justice and equality." (trans, Bangladesh, he/him)
- "I want to be the best version of myself so I can help emotionally support my children." (41, cis woman, she/her)
- "Learning to love myself." (38, France, she/her)
- "LOVE." (27, genderfluid, they/them)
- "Myself. I put other people first, so I tend to ignore my priorities." (30, bisexual, she/her)
- "Healing from my religious trauma and other traumas. My faith in Allah, my family, my partner, my cat, my creative outlets, and my friends, who can also be family to me." (cis woman, Egypt, she/her)
- "Contentment and peace. I want to be okay with whatever I feel, and to be okay with the consequences of my past and worries for my future." (35, Malaysia, she/her)
- "My layered identities as woman, Muslim, queer, bisexual, a nomad. Making art around the issue of sexuality. I must defend what I am convinced of so I do not give up on life. What’s also important to me is the LGBTQ community around me and our allies." (artist, Indonesia, she/her)
- "Myself, to be honest. And changing the mindset of people, to spread progressive ideas of Islam. Besides that, my work for the community is most important." (khwaja sira social activist, Pakistan, she/her)
- "Balance." (60s, nonbinary, they/them)
- "Kindness, empathy, and compassion. Helping other queer fellow Muslims better understand their relationship with God. Creating a space where we can sit and talk about our understanding of religion and God." (35, Pakistan, they/them)
“My chosen family and blood family are so important to me. My main concern is family and everything else is fleeting. I call those I can’t see, I check in daily when I can, the people who I consider my people mean so much to me. Then it’s my future. I’m starting college and I have so many expectations for myself. I’m always trying to become a better Muslim, I think about how important my faith is to me all the time. But you have to understand the meaning behind your actions for them to matter. What good are the ayahs I memorised if I don’t know what they mean? What good is my faith if I don’t afford everyone basic respect and humanity? I think the process of becoming is more important to me. How can I thrive in my spirituality? That is the question I am always trying to answer.” (18, cis woman, she/her)

Connecting Truth and the Divine

In this section, a lesbian confronts the extent of her internalised homophobia, a loving mother prays with her trans son in an Islamic boarding school, and a community of waria teach a conservative man something about God. We share answers from others about their relationship with prayer before jumping into Exercise 4, which is a big one! You will be invited to reflect on how your understanding of God grew with your understanding of your sexual diversity. If you need more time, read on for other people’s stories and answers. Remember to come back when you’re ready.

NAVIGATING INTERNALISED HOMOPHOBIA

She grew up thinking of the angels on her shoulders. “I used to believe God existed in the sky when I was small. My family would remind me: What God wants is for me to learn to read the Quran, pray, fast, not argue with my parents. Also to say Bismillah before I eat. Don’t do bad things, don’t steal, don’t go out and play in the middle of the night, be kind to your siblings. If not, God will be angry.

“My grandparents told me my actions were written by Raqib and Atid who were on my shoulders. If I thought of something bad but did not do it, it wouldn’t be written. But if I intended to do good, it would be written right away. As a child when I wanted to get up to no good, I would look at my left shoulder and say, ‘Don’t write this, okay?’”

She realised she wasn’t straight when she was 14, a teenager at an all-girls school. “So many of us were very close, but didn’t have any language for it. Why is it that we’d only sit with each other at school, call each other after school and spend hours on the phone, and get jealous of other friends?

“We had no words for it. Any sex ed in Islam about husband-wife relations made me uncomfortable. Everything I knew about religion at the time said being myself was haram. I tried to change myself, tried to like boys, because I thought God would not like me as I was. It was a feeling that lived in me for many years. I grew up in that feeling.”

Her internalised struggle externalised into targeting other lesbian Muslims for conversion therapy. “I was recruited by the Islamist political party in north-east Malaysia to find lesbians in local universities, something they trained me to do since I was 16. There were maybe 14 of us on campus. I was heavily involved in their activities, and later also in my university’s religious faculty. Every week we would have a study circle and I would use that opportunity to identify lesbians. I exposed a few of my friends. They were forced into religious camping trips and conversion therapy.”

Eventually, the realities of her actions led her to a crisis of faith. “’I didn’t want anything to do with the religion anymore. I rebelled by literally showing everyone my face. I took off the full veil and even wore jeans, deep in the feeling that God was pissed off with me anyway — so why not take it the whole way? Of course I got called in by the ones who recruited me and was kicked out of my community. And with that, I renounced being a part of whatever the majority called ‘faith at the time.’”

Although she lived out days that seemed conventional, she spent her evenings connecting her truth to the Divine. “I married a man, had children, got divorced. I worked throughout.

“When I had time to myself at the end of the day, I would spend it looking at the contradictions within me versus what I heard everyday, with what I was doing too! I was deeply closeted and homophobic. Everywhere I looked, I could not find where God says that I am supposed to be okay with myself. If God loved me, why test me with something I could not handle? I knew the Qur’an said Allah would not test me with something I could not handle. But this is my identity, my sexuality — how could I change that?

“Eventually, the realities of her actions led her to a crisis of faith.”

Despite the challenges, she continued to explore her faith and connect with others who shared similar beliefs. “I married a man, had children, got divorced. I worked throughout.”

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Prophet Muhammad’s biography with local music
we also do cultural ceremonies where we recite and read
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live with my family. We have our own pesantren — a very
Indonesia, and it’s a student city of many small pesantren. I
away.

He helped his siblings run the school after their parents pass
away. “I live in a small city much like other cities in
Indonesia, and it’s a student city of many small pesantren. I
live with my family. We have our own pesantren — a very
small one with 50 students. A daily routine here is pretty
much about learning Islam. We learn grammatical Arabic but
we also do cultural ceremonies where we recite and read
Prophet Muhammad’s biography with local music instruments (rebana). We learn public speaking and how to
converse with our peers about religion. I live deep in that
culture and daily routine. Sometimes I also teach
English here.”

His high school years in another pesantren left him uncertain about his understanding of God.

“When I was in high school, I went to a pesantren in another
city for three years. In Indonesia we have pesantren
Quran, designed for students to memorise the
Quran, and then there’s pesantren kitab — like
my family’s — which focuses on the study of
classical texts and critical thinking, and
debates. People are used to differences of
opinion in pesantren kitab, and

It seems sad right? I think there are more out there. We just haven’t met
them yet.”

“A lot of Islamic boarding schools exist here in Indonesia called pesantren. Students tend to
both live and learn there, so we all become very
close. My understanding of it is related to how I
see God: culturally, in family relationships, our
pesantren’s students, the neighbourhood, which
is majority Muslim. My understanding of God
makes most sense to me when I see people live it culturally,
rather than only in prayer.”

“I know that all my knowledge is still a drop in
the sea. But every sea has many shores, and to
pretend there is only one view of the ocean is to be a
blind follower. Detaching myself from being so figh-
based changed my life.

“I guess I became briefly disconnected with my own
understandings of Islam and God during this time. Because I
grew up with all these Muslim cultural activities in my family, I
saw people, not really God. I see the beauty of our people and our
warmth. I loved the connection between us when we gather
and celebrate religious activities. But I didn’t connect this to my own
understanding of religion and God, which totally changed when I went
back home after graduating high school and college.”

“Queer people are often forced to meet ustazees and ustazahs who are very queerphobic. But somehow I met religious leaders who taught
me about equality in Islam.

“They taught me about the Divine with a more positive
approach, incorporating justice and gender equality. I
remember being in Jakarta for an interfaith community
meeting, and I encountered an ulama, Kyai Husein
Muhammad, who really moved me. He said that God doesn’t
see your gender or your racial identity. What God sees in you
is your taqwa, the deeds you do when you are practicing your
faith. This Kyai (pesantren leader) writes many books on
gender equality, Islam, and women. He helped me understand
Islam with through a Sufi framework, I enjoy his lectures. His
work and others have really changed the way I see God and
religion. When I realised God doesn’t see me as male or
female, I started to explore my queer
identity.”

After the death of his beloved mother, he prays alone in a separate building,
despite family acceptance.

“I have been praying away from my community for five years now, since I
started my transition. When my mother
was alive, we would pray together. I was mostly by
her side taking care of her. She was an ustazah,
though we have another word for it in my village. I used to accompany
her during her public teachings with the local people.

“Although my family has already accepted me as a trans man,
I realised not all people at the school feel comfortable about
me praying together with them. But my mother was the
only person who was open to me that way. She changed
my name on her phone, and always invited me to pray
with her. We prayed in my room in a separate
building. I would lead her, or she would lead me.

After meeting Muslims who helped him reconcile his faith
with justice and gender equality, he began exploring his queer
identity with the support of his parents. “Queer people are
“Now I pray by myself, even though I want a sense of belonging in my society. That’s my biggest challenge. Sometimes I go to cities where no one knows me and pray in a mosque there. Luckily our pesantren has many other activities that are less formal than prayer. For example, I can still be with everyone in other Islamic cultural activities like singing stories of the Prophet with the rebana. There are more mixed activities than segregated ones.”

He discovered a relationship with God is not a quest with a gate you walk through, it’s a puzzle you hold and patiently discover pieces of. “I don’t see my journey and personal experience of seeing God and my queerness in one package as a gate I could find and walk through to change everything. For me it was more like a puzzle.

“The gender equality learning in understanding Islam better is one of the puzzle pieces. When I met a psychiatrist who observed me for six months, then validated my identity as a trans man and connected me to a doctor who gave me hormone therapy — that’s another piece of the puzzle. Feeling aligned with my body improved my confidence. Then when I came out to my parents who supported me, defended me, and gave me a safe space in my family — that’s another puzzle piece. And I put it all together, as some of the many parts to understanding God and my faith with more confidence.”

However, one needs a lot of patience to solve a puzzle. “In Indonesia it was really difficult to find mental health experts who aren’t queerphobic — I went through three different people before finding someone friendly and understanding. I think that period of time really cultivated my resilience.

“It felt like God sent me a message: You have to be patient. This is your truth, but you have to be patient to find the ways to get there. It helped so much that my parents were always with me during that time. Honestly, I would say that I can see God everywhere. When I saw my mother I saw God in her, because she supports me. The psychiatrist that supported me and is not queerphobic, I see God in him. It feels very empowering for me to know that I have dealt with so much before being where I am now. It was an enlightening journey that prepared me for the future.”

While helping his family run their school, he works remotely on projects that connect queer people to religious leaders and inclusive religious interpretations.

“What is most important right now is that I continue doing the work I am doing now to spread the ideas that Islam and other religions really love justice and equality. Also, my mental health is important. In my personal journey I want to have more experiences with spirituality. I’ve never done yoga before, so maybe I’ll try that. And I want to make healing spaces, because they have really affected my mental health in a positive way.”

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“Now I pray by myself, even though I want a sense of belonging in my society. That’s my biggest challenge. Sometimes I go to cities where no one knows me and pray in a mosque there. Luckily our pesantren has many other activities that are less formal than prayer. For example, I can still be with everyone in other Islamic cultural activities like singing stories of the Prophet with the rebana. There are more mixed activities than segregated ones.”

He discovered a relationship with God is not a quest with a gate you walk through, it’s a puzzle you hold and patiently discover pieces of. “I don’t see my journey and personal experience of seeing God and my queerness in one package as a gate I could find and walk through to change everything. For me it was more like a puzzle.

“The gender equality learning in understanding Islam better is one of the puzzle pieces. When I met a psychiatrist who observed me for six months, then validated my identity as a trans man and connected me to a doctor who gave me hormone therapy — that’s another piece of the puzzle. Feeling aligned with my body improved my confidence. Then when I came out to my parents who supported me, defended me, and gave me a safe space in my family — that’s another puzzle piece. And I put it all together, as some of the many parts to understanding God and my faith with more confidence.”

However, one needs a lot of patience to solve a puzzle. “In Indonesia it was really difficult to find mental health experts who aren’t queerphobic — I went through three different people before finding someone friendly and understanding. I think that period of time really cultivated my resilience.

“It felt like God sent me a message: You have to be patient. This is your truth, but you have to be patient to find the ways to get there. It helped so much that my parents were always with me during that time. Honestly, I would say that I can see God everywhere. When I saw my mother I saw God in her, because she supports me. The psychiatrist that supported me and is not queerphobic, I see God in him. It feels very empowering for me to know that I have dealt with so much before being where I am now. It was an enlightening journey that prepared me for the future.”

While helping his family run their school, he works remotely on projects that connect queer people to religious leaders and inclusive religious interpretations.

“What is most important right now is that I continue doing the work I am doing now to spread the ideas that Islam and other religions really love justice and equality. Also, my mental health is important. In my personal journey I want to have more experiences with spirituality. I’ve never done yoga before, so maybe I’ll try that. And I want to make healing spaces, because they have really affected my mental health in a positive way.”
learned from waria and sex workers that God depends on the
goodness of people. They think of God as always the forgiving. We might be corrupt, but
God will forgive us.

“Although their families don’t accept them, and they can’t return to celebrate Eid, they still want to send something back to them and would save up for it. They don’t make much. So for Ramadan and Eid, they would offer free haircuts to villagers and neighbours. They told me: ‘Even if we don’t have money, we must be generous in the community.’ I realised the Qur’an we learned in books, in classes, in pesantren, in university, is not the same Qur’an of reality shown by the waria community. Even though society has a problem with them, they will not abandon society. They help regardless of what is said about them.”

Moving from formalised inner conflict to embodied truth, he realised that God ‘sounds’ different based on where one stands in society.

“God is more nuanced than black and white, and His voice emerges in some form. In that year-long or so period of getting to know them, something changed when I read the Qur’an. I no longer heard a Qur’an that was condescending and unjust. God’s voice had changed to me.”

He once asked the women: How did they know God is there? “They said they always feel God is here. The proof, they say, is that their prayers rarely go unanswered. God listens and responds to them — maybe not in the ways they expect, but what they originally ask for emerges in some form. In that year-long or so period of getting to know them, something changed when I read the Qur’an. I no longer heard a Qur’an that was condescending and unjust. God’s voice had changed to me.”

What does he think being a religious person means now?

“To be a religious person is to be chill. I was in Indonesia again recently for a study exchange program. And someone asked the resource person: ‘Aren’t you scared of these interpretations? What if you go to hell?’ He answered, ‘I live in Cerebon, and I’m a Madura guy. Madura is our hottest state. It rarely rains in Cerebon too. So since I don’t like cold places, maybe hell would be better for me. It’s hot, and us smokers won’t even need to bring a lighter. We can just stick one out and fire up!’ He maintains his humour, see? To be a religious person, we must be relaxed.”

PRAYING TO CHANGE VS. PRAYING FOR CHANGE

“It was in my teenage years that I truly grasped the concept of God without anyone influencing me. It was mainly when I was depressed with my religious belief and sexuality. I prayed a lot and when I got my answer, I discovered God isn’t against me. I believe when I stopped thinking about killing myself was when I experienced God’s love. I felt like killing myself because I couldn’t accept my identity as a gay Muslim, but that changed after much prayer, and a sense of peace came over me with my identities.”

Therapy helped a lot to be honest. My therapist wasn’t exactly pro-LGBTQ, but he helped me accept the things I couldn’t change. My focus shifted from trying to find a place for me in the Islamic canon to focusing on the relationship I had with God growing up. I focused on Allah, the All-Merciful, my best friend, who is just and kind and would never punish His creation for being who they were, rather than the scary and exacting Allah homophobes made Him out to be. I stopped praying to change, and that’s when I found peace. I still experience moments of turbulence, but it’s a process, and I’m definitely on the more secure and calmer end now alhamdullilah. That definitely took a lot of work to get there.”

“I found out I was queer when I was 19. Initially, it was hard to deal with my feelings. I was ashamed and in denial. I was taught that being queer was a sin and that I was going to hell. But the more I fought my feelings, the bigger the feelings grew. It got to a point where I gave up. I prayed to God and told God I was going to accept myself. My queerness is something that is part of me. I believe that God loves me regardless as long as I try to be a good human being.”

“I still pray, read the Quran and fast. It took me awhile to find other Muslims of all kinds such as divorcees, queer people and Muslims with disabilities. It made me realise I’m also unique. It took me a long way to accept who I am and why God made me like this.”
They don’t remember ever being introduced to God — “Although I must’ve been. What I mean by that is I don’t remember there ever being an absence of God in my early life.

“My most positive earliest memory of God was through devotional songs and dhikr, those recordings were played in the house way back when I was a baby, like qawwalis of dhikr and nasyeeds of the Qasidah Burdah — still a big favorite for me.”

For a while, it was a very friendly, musical relationship. However that quickly shifted. “At the age of 3-5, I was introduced to my most negative experience of God when my parents began to physically abuse me.

“They used religion and ‘for the sake of Allah’ as excuses to continue the physical abuse until I was 18.

“Through the abuse, my relationship to God would shift from love to desperation or outright rejection, peppered with a series of near-death experiences, until I finally left my family home in my 20s.

“It was only after I left and set boundaries between them and me that I could hear and receive God again — as myself and for myself.”

“They always thought God was someone who is extremely rich and lives in a big house where everything is white. At first I thought Islam has no place for a trans or a homosexual, and God does not permit it. Then realisations happened and I learn and understand more every day I get older. My belief in God grows stronger as I age. I have a tricky relationship with God. Sometimes I get angry with God, sometimes I think of apologising to God for being ignorant, sometimes I love God for just being there for me.” (33, trans woman, she/her)

“God was a white-haired white man in the clouds. It was available in all the Christian images of God that came my way. The race of God as depicted was never commented upon, so it was reinforced. Mercifully this racialised and gendered notion was so easy to let go of because of how concrete and limited it was. That allowed me to head down the road to a more transcendental idea and image.” (convert/revert, nonbinary, they/them)

“My mom first told me about Allah. I was 5 or 6. It made me so mad, because I would ask all these questions about Allah’s characteristics that she said didn’t exist. ‘What color is their eyes?’ They don’t have eyes. ‘What kind of clothes do they wear?’ They don’t wear clothes. ‘So they’re naked?’ No, not that either. It was so confusing to even consider!” (cis woman, USA, she/her)

NEGOTIATING FAITH AND SEXUALITY

She was in a three year relationship with a woman who believed being themselves was haram. “I met someone and at first we had a relationship where we were like, let’s start praying together — which was great. And then she increasingly became super right-wing conservative!”
“This ex was butch and so were her friends. They were all in queer relationships and not really religious. At the same time, I was beginning to get involved with rights activism, meeting activists, and being completely inspired by all that.

“This obviously created a problem. She didn’t want me to lean that way politically, and tried to pull me back. I started to chip away a lot of parts of myself, and the relationship became abusive in a different sense. She would tell me: Jangan tegakkan benang yang basah, which is to say ‘Don’t try to find justifications for your desires.’

“There’s so much out there about what other people say God wants, but what does God really want? And what did I want? I was confused about my values. I paid a lot of attention to what other people were saying. And my ex’s stance on queerness and Islam was that it was a haram combination.

“She started to wear the hijab in our second year. Since I already wear it, I taught her how to. I liked giving people the benefit of the doubt. But since the personal is political, what happened was these disagreements just took over — like about supporting trans people and being a feminist. She’d shut me down and use the excuse of: I’m doing this for your own good because I care, because I love you.

“We argued about how do you care for someone and do so without imposing your beliefs on them. When people like her believe that there is only one right path, they tend to be very controlling because they fear for you. It’s a very toxic way of showing someone you care.

“I always thought being queer was haram. My relationship with Allah didn’t change but I wondered if my queerness was a test, challenge, or something that was to be accepted. I had a lot of religious anxiety around being queer. But Alhamdulillah, it passed.” (mother, pansexual, she/her)

“I always thought I was a sinner who would burn in the deepest parts of hell because God doesn’t like men like me, or people like me. It was natural that I hated myself. I thought God has clearly stated in the Quran what he did to Lut’s people and how he passed.” (35, Pakistan, they/them)

“I felt anger, because if I expected anything from anyone, it was God. I felt as though He deprived me from having a life as easy as others, from the sinless relationships I could have if I were straight.” (cis man, Qatar, he/him)

“I felt an almost immediate schism. I also felt a little betrayed to be honest, and abandoned. I felt like I had done everything ‘right’ Islamically, only to have this massive thing thrown at me. I didn’t understand why I was being tested in such a massive way, when I had spent my entire life up to that point always trying to follow Islam exactly, to the point of rigidity. I ultimately believed it was a test I would overcome, and I prayed very hard for God to change me. I went through a very intense, and almost traumatic, period of turmoil, faith-wise. I was a mess.” (30, Egypt, she/her)

“I started self-harming when I was 13 due to the overwhelming self-hate that I was experiencing due to my sexuality and depression. That self-hate quickly turned into anger towards religion. I know I’m not an atheist, but I didn’t want to be tied down by a thousand year old scripture either! I used to try to change and prayed that God would make me like boys, but I have accepted my sexuality now.” (19, Malaysia, she/her)

“I almost immediately stopped calling myself Muslim when I started calling myself queer. I thought I had to — like if I didn’t do it, someone else would do it for me. I’m lucky I’m able to live with my truth at such a young age, because I know it’s still difficult for so many others. It wasn’t until I started seeing the work of Muslim creatives that I found out that LGBTQ Muslims existed. I would search for ‘LGBTQ Muslim’ and see what popped up. But my relationship with God did not change. I’ve always believed in a higher being, and looking back I don’t think I ever stopped being a Muslim. I just felt ashamed of calling myself that because I thought it wasn’t possible.” (18, pansexual, she/her)

ARRIVING TO CURRENT SPIRITUAL LOCATION

As she entered her 30s, she had the opportunity to work for about a year in the USA. Creating distance from her religious trauma gave her room to explore faith again. “It was there when I attempted to study the Quran again. I felt like I gained a new perspective of it when I didn’t have the pressure of being around other Muslims back in Malaysia. Because of that freedom, I think I understood it better. It’s not that Americans are so great. It’s just that nobody bothered me about what I looked like, what I wore.

“So I came back to the Quran because I wanted to understand what God said. Not anyone else, or their interpretations. I had enough of people telling me what they think of what God said and expecting me to take that as truth. By then, I studied a lot of other things on my own and understood them, so why not the Quran?

“A lot of what I read opened my eyes to the fact that many, many Muslims unfortunately behave nothing like what’s described in the Quran. It was a very ‘F*** you guys!’ moment. Where I’m at now, I’ve embraced the mystery that comes with building a relationship between believer and Being.

“I don’t need anyone else to understand what my relationship with God is. Even my anger with God is nobody else’s business. I don’t need justification, approval, I don’t need to demonstrate my faith to anybody. In fact I find the way a lot of people demonstrate faith in Malaysia is vulgar. Through my readings and valuing the fact that I get older
every day, I realise I need to spend every bit of time I have living it the way I want to.”

When he was young, he was told half of his family would go to hell. “My mother used to say: God made man, man made religion, religion made war. My ustazes and ustazahs in primary and secondary school used to say that all non-Muslims would go to Hell, which traumatised me because my mum’s side of the family is not Muslim. My mum used to tell me these ustazes and ustazahs were idiots, but that wasn’t very comforting because I had internalised the idea that my mum, being a convert, wasn’t a ‘proper’ Muslim.”

When he believed he would go to hell too, he tried another path altogether. “First, I tried to pray the gay away. I would seek repentance as a teenager and be terrified when I still had desires for other boys. When I went to university, I was too traumatised from the Friday khutbahs which talked repeatedly about hellfire and worldly punishments for homosexuals. One day I couldn’t take it anymore and I thought — if I can’t stop being gay, maybe I should stop being Muslim.

“By then I was making so many non-Muslim friends studying in Australia. They were delightful and good people. They knew I was gay and accepted me. So I thought if they are damned, and I am damned, then something must be horribly wrong with Islam. I decided to just stop believing. But I couldn’t ‘do’ atheism. I couldn’t leave Islam alone.”

So he started looking at other spiritual possibilities. “I explored Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. I was thirsting for a spiritual path, but one that would include me and not threaten me with eternal damnation.

Strangely enough, it was a signal from Muslims back home that anchored him. “After awhile, I discovered Sisters in Islam in a documentary on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV network, and they saved my life. I also discovered queer Muslim websites and discussion forums like Queer Jihad and Al Fatiha in the US. Finally, I discovered the reformist writings of the British Muslim intellectual, Ziauddin Sardar. These encounters slowly helped me to climb back into Islam from the abyss of depression and self-hatred that I had fallen into.”

He revisited Islam with fresh eyes to arrive where he is today. “I’ve had to completely destroy my earliest preconceptions about Islam — and religion — and rebuild it from the ground up. What went into it? Encountering Sisters in Islam in person when I returned to Malaysia. Discovering the works of progressive and feminist Muslim writers such as Fatima Mernissi, amina wadud, Omid Safi, Scott Kugle, Ziba Mir-Hosseini and so many more.

“Learning about Islam for myself. Learning about the religious traditions that nourished the friends I respected in Malaysia, especially Roman Catholicism and Lutheran and Orthodox Christianity. Praying my first Friday jummah prayer led by an openly gay imam at an LGBTQI conference. Discovering Imaan, the LGBTQI Muslim organisation based in London, and then the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, also based in London.

“I always thought my spirituality is deficient and too renegade for anyone to accept, but my devoutly-Muslim friend once told me, you are spiritual! Another Sufi friend said to me that I am supporting the Prophet’s work through my queer jihad. It’s Muslims like these who nourish me and give me faith. Allah makes His/Her/Their signs known to me through these amazing Muslims who affirm me and open their hearts to me.”

“What changed my mind was visiting my first ever international convening of queer Muslims in 2016. I accepted myself afterwards and my self-hate stopped. It was just a big surprise to me that there were so many activists and feminists who were so confident in their beliefs and kept practicing Islam. Learning about interpretations beyond orthodox selectivity made me calm down that I wasn’t the one in the wrong direction in need to repent just because I’m queer. Islam is about love and peace, and so is my feminism. It is revolutionary and possible to see these two are not against each other, and in fact can complement each other to strengthen our movements. I learned that I wasn’t the only feminist who considered herself queer and not abandoned by God because of who she is. God used to be male to me, and now I don’t have an image of God, I think God is very deep inside of me. The fact that I can still pray, fast, and believe what I want to believe is Allah’s power for me. I do not believe anymore that God is eager to punish.”

(single mother, 31, she/her)

“I met a friend when I was studying my masters in the UK and she was the religious type. I assumed she was the judgemental religious type from the clothes she wears, typically modest Malay Muslim clothes with the hand socks. When I got to know her, she was not who I thought she was. Her approach to spirituality is inspired by Rumi and I liked how she approaches worship and piety. Being friends with her made me realise that it’s okay to struggle with being a Muslim and making mistakes along the way. She proved to me that there is more than one way to being Muslim.” (29, Malaysia, she/her)

“I think the work of Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle changed my life. I remember reading his works one night after a recommendation from a friend. I cried for several hours. I regret being away from God and I regret not looking for answers. I regret hating myself and nurturing that frustration for so long, believing that God doesn’t love me. Kugle’s writing completely transformed me, but it took some years to set in. I had help with other scholars’ works too. My friends and I started our own Quran interpretation class with the help of different tafseers and translations: it helped us a lot. I am at a very peaceful and a just relationship with God at this point in my life. I used to imagine myself in front of God when praying in my early 20s to present my case to when doing the sajda, being completely submissive and presenting all myself to Her love. I have recently started imagining God as gender neutral or preferably a Her, and somehow that has improved my understanding of God.” (gay, Pakistan, they/them)
Experiences of Divine Love

In conversation, some say they experienced Divine love in their own journeys in specific interventions such as in dreams and people. But some of us pushed back on this question altogether, reframed it, and instead shared a broader and more perpetual experience of Divine love. When reflecting on the past, an awareness and continuous appreciation of the Divine helped many of us in developing resilience and acceptance. All these different stories were answers to one question — you’ll find that in Exercise 5.

VIVID AND UNFORGETTABLE DREAMS

At the worst point of his depression, a teenage atheist in Singapore was sent a dream that he believes saved his life. “I was 18. I had survived 2 suicide attempts. At my worst depressive period, I had a dream where I had a birds-eye view over a desert, and I saw a black cube.

“I felt a message in my heart that wasn’t in any language I knew. It told me: Lay down your burdens, and face Makkah. Keep in mind I wasn’t a Muslim yet.

“I only knew Makkah was an important place. So I couldn’t make sense of this dream, and asked a close Muslim friend what she thought it meant. She told me that the Kaabah is the most holy site in Islam, and facing Makkah is what you do when entering prayer. Although I was an atheist, I was considering
“I had to adopt a different way of looking at life, and change at a deeper level. That must be how this dream came and focused me into one particular direction, which is Islam. I started doing research online. I’m grateful that I didn’t do research by going to a madrasah or the community leaders, or I would have gone the other way I think. But I have a curious mind, and research what I learn thoroughly instead of just taking it for granted. I spent a few years learning and realising that this speaks to me. Many religions have their own systems and bodies of knowledge — what’s so special about Islam? I can’t explain it. But there was something about it that spoke to me and made me feel I belong. The dream was obviously a really big part of that experience. It sparked everything, it saved my life. I’m so grateful. I don’t think I would have been alive today without that dream.”

He grew up in a non-religious family. At one point, he didn’t think God existed at all. “I was the kind of atheist who argued with pastors. I was confrontational and angry. A friend brought me to church once and I argued with the cell group leader. So it was a mindfuck for a lot of people to realise their gay hardcore atheist friend is becoming Muslim! I was also Salafi at first. The easiest way to self-learn is to read the Quran, the hadith, and basic legalistic approaches to Islam, what you can or cannot do. So I was that kind of Muslim when I started. I think the lack of direction from my depression was an easy void for Salafi leanings to fill in. I wanted to follow others though.

Coming out as Muslim to others meant adjusting to a set of new social norms. “I never had any moral pressure from my family and friends to be straight. But after I converted to Islam and entered the university’s tight-knit conservative Muslim community, for the first time in my life I thought ‘Okay bye guys, I’m going back into the closet!'”

“I grew up comfortable with drinking, partying, and touch. Most of my friends were girls. But now I couldn’t even shake their hands, let alone hug them. I had a tough time adjusting at first. I joined the university’s Muslim society in hopes of making things more inclusive. I failed, but I made a few friends!”

Through his community work, he began redefining his faith for himself and finding ways out of compartmentalisation. “I started meeting people with progressive Muslim perspectives, exploring more discourse to break out of the Salafi shell and learn a comprehensive framework incorporating social sciences and philosophy. I went from ‘yeah I’m gay and Muslim, I don’t have to mix the two’ to not even seeing them as having to be separate. Even if it’s a bit premature of me to say that I have the definitive answer of what it means to be Muslim, at the very least I know that there is nothing about being gay that is anti-Muslim.

“Sometimes people ask me how I can be a Muslim if I’m gay. At one point I told myself: The signs are clear for me. It would be such a pity for me to ignore them and experimenting with rituals and spirituality, because the depression was just killing me.

Above all, his curiosity about God persists. “I sometimes ask my partner how he makes sense of something, since he was born Muslim. He’ll say God is bigger than that, God wouldn’t be so petty. Now I think God is bigger than Islam. Islam was just my way of finding God. I want an idea of God that isn’t dogmatic, a God that is bigger than just Islam. That’s where I am now. I still identify as Muslim and love so much about Islam. Now I’m curious to learn about Muslims in contexts I am unfamiliar with. I would love to meet Muslims in Russia and South Asia. I am yearning to learn from different cultures, but my faith is resolute and present.”

She was born in the 1960s, to a mother who scolded her for even mentioning her teacher was pregnant. “Any talk of sex was off the table. I loved playing with my brother instead of my sister, and always wanted to wear the same clothes he did. My mother was a religious teacher, an ustazah. Sometimes I would put my head on her lap when she was sewing clothes, and she would tell me stories of the prophets. I liked those. But other than that, most things that came out of her mouth was to tell me something was sinful, this was sinful, that was sinful. To the point where I didn’t even understand what sin meant anymore.”

She loved music as a teenager, and interviewed for the national youth orchestra. “My mother was angry and disappointed when I got in. What’s the point of being a musician? Banging on the timpani? You couldn’t go anywhere with that, she said. So since I couldn’t enjoy music, I withdrew. I thought the best thing I could do was to be a more filial daughter and live up to her expectations. I didn’t have the opportunity to be myself, so maybe this is where I’ll find my journey. A family member already warned my mother that I was just like her younger brother, my uncle.”

Her mother later forced that gay uncle to get married. “I confronted her about that. And she said to me, don’t you read the Quran?”

Eventually, after being subjected to conversion therapy in her early 20s, she too got married at 28. “Our marriage wasn’t a love marriage, but an arranged one. I did my very best to be a good wife and filial daughter. Every day I was married to that man, I woke up in a different dimension. I didn’t recognise myself in the mirror. It was just not me.”

They divorced after disagreeing on their duties. “I could never forget that fight. He was forcing me to obey him. My mother fell sick, and he was still saying I had to listen to him. Something my mother taught me that I did cherish was to be brave when I know I’m right.”

After the passing of her mother, she had an unforgettable dream of a tree glittering with snakes. “A vivid dream I can still recall today happened after my mother passed away. I was under a huge tree with a thick trunk and very wide canopy. The tree was
covered in snakes with red eyes of every type and colour, all over its branches and under its shade on the ground. It was impossible to walk anywhere.

“Near me was an old man with long white hair and a robe, bare feet. I didn’t know where to walk. Suddenly a snake dropped down from a branch. It was entirely white, and one of its kind. It said gently: Hold me! So I reached out to the snake and it became a walking stick.

“Where it hit, the snakes cleared a path. The old man reached out his hand to me and said come follow me, we’ll leave this place. It was a long walk to leave the canopy because the tree was so big. As we walked, the man became younger, and younger. I thought this person was a metaphor or memory of someone I already knew, but looking back time and again I realise it wasn’t any person. I think of the staff as my faith and the old man as an angel sent to guide me. It was such a long journey. When I finally left the shade of the tree, I was on top of a green, green hill — the scenery had changed entirely. The man was no longer there.”

Now she runs a healing circle for queer Muslims. “I wanted a space where LGBT Muslims could reach out to us, and we could reassure them.”

“I dreamed of saying goodbye to my late grandmother’s energy the night before she passed away. In that dream I went to a heavenly space where there was a guide, my inner child, and myself/grandma — a being who was the embodiment of both our energies. We were studying and taking a test in the deep woods. After that, we played in the Japanese zen garden, discussing the purpose of life. I vividly remember splashing in the shallow lake towards the Japanese zen garden, discussing the purpose of life. I took a test in the deep woods. After that, we played in the Japanese zen garden, discussing the purpose of life. I vividly remember splashing in the shallow lake towards

overtook me. Eventually the calm feeling left, but would reappear over the following weeks whenever suicidal thoughts came back. During them I would always end up humming in the calm. It wasn’t until later when I started watching Islamic clips online to learn how to pray that I realised I was humming the al-Fatihah. It was a breathtaking experience to realise this. For me, that solidified the existence of Allah.” (gay, Australia, he/him)

LOVING RELATIONSHIPS AS A WAY OF ACCESSING DIVINE LOVE

She is a Malay Malaysian who grew up in a small rural town. “16 years of living in a northern state, in a predominantly Islamic way of living, dominated by the Islamist political party’s perspective of how a Muslim state is supposed to be. Everyone had a way of conforming. We had an ustaz that came to our home every week, and when he talked about gender, I could see my mom struggle with what he was saying. I struggled with it too. But we didn’t talk about it. I found myself attracted to women, but never thought about it much. I only started discovering my sexuality when I moved to Kuala Lumpur. It just never came up earlier.”

At the International Islamic University, she was exhilarated to encounter Muslims from all over the world for the first time. Access to resources and discussions led her to asking more questions than ever before. “I got to meet Muslims from Sudan, from Palestine, and everyone was so open to talking about gender politics! It was great, but still nobody talked about sexuality. It was something everyone was aware of, but we didn’t want to poke a sleeping bear. Wherever you go, nobody wants to touch that. They just go back to the surah about Lut with a reading so black and white I struggled to find peace. The real challenge to my relationship with God was when I was no longer in that space of being just Malay, Muslim, Malaysian, and woman — the minute sexual orientation came in, that was the beginning of me feeling really lonely.”

Away from her family, she finally began considering what she had avoided all this while. “The challenges and difficulties I went through and my reactions to them was because of the internal conflict I was going through this whole time. I did go through a phase where I separated Islam and God. I struggled so much with this particular brand of Islam in Malaysia — and thought it’d be easier to just focus on my relationship with God instead of all the politics. I felt more comfortable saying I respect all religions but don’t affiliate with a specific one. But that also felt like me trying to run away from it. Being queer and Muslim here is to be put in a state of existential crisis. I cannot change my religion on paper. There are layers of control,
and trying to break out of that is scary. It’s so tiring, so frustrating exhausting to have to defend yourself all the time, to feel you’re not going to win this fight. But I do what I can with exploring and learning, going through it.

Then she met a non-Muslim Chinese woman. They fall in love, move in together, and have now been together for over ten years. “My partner’s father is Taoist, her mother is Christian, and she’s a Buddhist. We sleep in the same bed, but I have my own room because space is important to me. There’s a single bed, a fish tank, my collection of books. It’s a beautiful room of mine, a space for me to self-reflect and pray. When I looked into Buddhism, their idea of formlessness sounded so peaceful. It helps me feel more connected to the Beloved, that everything is just a manifestation of that divinity — from the biggest to the smallest form, like my cat. Ever since I started being with my partner, I became more curious about learning to know Islam as a whole.”

However, she’s never defined the relationship to her parents, even after they move from the east to live in the same city. “She has come over to the family house to hang out, so my parents are aware of how close we are. I’m really reactive to my family. I feel that they know, especially my mother. But maybe there is this fear of asking — like you don’t want to know the truth, so you don’t ask for it. My dad once said to me: ‘I’m really worried you live with a non-Muslim, what if you get influenced by them? What if you start smoking?’ Lord have mercy, I’m almost 40 now, I’m an adult woman! I own whatever I do. You know, I sometimes wonder how they would react if I was dating a Muslim woman. How would that be? Would it be more difficult or easier? I’m not happy that I can’t be myself with my family. Ever since they moved here, I struggle with compartmentalising, I’ve been going through the process of addressing and acknowledging what I am feeling, the masks, and I’m upset with myself and all my variables.”

The tensions between race, religion, and queerness also come up in comfortable spaces with her partner’s friends, and this aggravates my sense of belonging. Whenever I hang out with them, most of the time I’m explaining and explaining, and I’m so tired. They ask me: How do you reconcile both? Even non-Muslims are perpetuating that belief that my faith and sexuality can’t go together. I get very happy when I see other people who I think are like me. But there’s some discomfort talking about it in the queer scene. We haven’t exactly created a space to figure it out and to have these conversations. When someone says to me that I’m not like other Malays or other Muslims, what does that mean? It’s so isolating. I am Malay, and I am Muslim! In comfortable spaces, to have someone say I’m not like the others is so confusing.

Yet when she talks about her partner, her face lights up. “All astrology says we’re not meant to be together. And yet, when I’m with her — how do I say this? — I feel like myself. I don’t feel so open to it. The way she treats me, she allows me the space to be me. When I make a mistake, she’s there, instead of saying this is wrong or right. And I love that openness.

“I’m right there with her too — she’s non-Muslim, she’s not Malay, she feels neglected and isolated as a minority in our country. I’m here unpacking that with her, human to human. Even though she’s six years older than me, there’s a lightness to her that I am so drawn to. She reminds me to laugh. I think that’s important, because life can be so heavy, and you need to be around people who remind you to play a bit. There’s nothing wrong with that. My God, what a blessing. All these years of having in my head that our relationship was a challenge to overcome, just because I love this person through all these obstacles. I’ve gone through the process of asking: Is this a choice? Could I just have said no? Was this a temptation that I failed? I tend to forget the importance of our love, and sometimes antagonise God for it. I’ve asked so many times, why did you make me queer, God! But the more I think about it, what a blessing she is to me. InshaAllah we’ll be together forever, but our mantra has always been one day at a time.”

Now she is learning to make peace with her discomfort. “More than ever before I am going back into my faith, that curiosity. I read the Qur’an and try to really look at it, and find more resources. I wouldn’t have done that if I was comfortable where I am — I’m doing it because I’m not. Do I go through moments of self-loathing and doubt? Yes, even now. But is it something that can’t be managed? No. At the depths of those feelings, I ask myself: What is the point of me being here? And reminding myself that everything has a purpose lifts me back up.”

He recalls the women in his life whose friendships brought him closer to the Divine. “A bit more than a decade ago, my soulmate, a Muslim woman of impeccable integrity, died of a terminal illness.

“We had a complicated relationship, but I was glad to be with her to the end, and helped to bury her. I was beside myself with grief and life was slowly unravelling. I had stopped praying by this point — this friend of mine was very disillusioned with Islam too, although she made peace with it before she died.

“But I had a longing to pray again, to seek God again, to be comforted in prayer. And just when I acknowledged this longing, I came into contact with this post-Salafi friend of mine, who nurtured me back into more regular prayer and practice, but without judging me for my sexuality. We read the Qur’an together, talked about God together, and became angels to each other.

“We are still close, even though we are separated geographically. When we were first getting close to each other, I said that I didn’t have strong faith. That I was a bit agnostic and wasn’t a very good Muslim. I don’t really pray five times a day, and I still have an ambivalent relationship with the Qur’an and Hadith. But I told her, one day in Ramadan about 10 years ago, I was praying Subuh, and my heart was filled with such longing for Allah that I cried during my sujud. She cried too when I told her and said: You truly are spiritual, you know. And for the first time in a long time, I truly felt seen...”

“I started being with my partner, I became more curious about...”
A MORE PERPETUAL EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE LOVE

Instead of single major moments, his experience of Divine love is reflected by meetings and moments that seem to happen by coordinated design. “There haven’t been any miracles or dreams for me. I learn a lot about God through people, through incidents. Every milestone I have has been because of an encounter with people. So I learn about God through everyone I meet. Ordinary people, some who others don’t even want to see or meet or know. Sometimes it’s a sequence of events that do not feel like coincidences.”

Raised in a conservative and traditional family, he was humbled into a big change while working on his degree. “I was sent to an Islamic boarding school to study religion and the Quran from very young. Then I was trained in law and theology. At 20 or 21, I had just written a criticism of Amina Wadud for leading mixed congregations. She had led congregational prayer for the second time, in the US. I was still conservative then.”

He spent every day outside of class attending mosque lectures. But one day, the ustaz teaching in that mosque fell ill and could not make it. With the free time suddenly on his hands, he decided to go to the library. “So I was there reading classical tafsir, and I stumbled into the distinguished interpreter al-Tabari mentioning a ruling on women leading prayer in congregation. He presented an Umm Waraqa hadith and all the viewpoints on the issue, but he criticised the opinion that it was haram. His view was that women could lead a congregation, although there were more details to that. That was when I realised there were other opinions about this issue and it was never black and white. Years later I actually told Amina Wadud about all of this, because it navigated me somewhere different. After I read that al-Tabari interpretation, I decided to read classical texts in the library more often, and only went to mosque lectures every other day instead of every day.”

These days, he is a practicing raqi, an Islamic spiritual healer, in a popular center run by the former spiritual advisor of a political party. “If things happen regarding the supernatural, such as possessions, I help heal it. It’s fairly common for people in Southeast Asia to attempt to ‘cure’ gayness with Muslim spiritual rituals like these. A few lesbian couples even called me from Indonesia for support when they found out their family wanted to send them for religious healing. I know it to exist in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. A few families have taken their queer children in to the center I work at, claiming their children are possessed by djinn. I receive those cases, and tell them there’s nothing wrong with their child. I think that is one of my contributions to the queer community! I am still in contact with some of those kids today.”

“I really can’t think of just one. Allah has been there for me in so many ways, has answered so many of my duas. I remember one of the companions saying something to the effect of, ‘If the skies were to part and I’d see Allah, that wouldn’t make me more certain of His existence than I already am.’ I truly believe that.” (freelance writer, Egypt, she/her)
“No specific experience comes to mind, but I like to think that God blessed me with impeccable gut feelings. It’s like He’s speaking to me through them. I used to ignore my gut feelings before — they felt somewhat ‘unsubstantiated’, but over time I realised that I can trust them, always, 100%. I’d like to think that that’s God’s way of telling me to beware, of watching out for me.” (bisexual, cis woman, she/her)

“In my life there have been quite a few negative experiences. But I’ve always come out of those learning something, and became a better person from them. One time I experienced temporary deafness just as I was contemplating a podcasting offer. It felt like God said: I can take this away from you at any time, so don’t just approach this as a money-making gig or purely for fun. Make sure you use this for a good reason and tell stories that need to be told to benefit your community.” (genderfluid, Singapore, he/him)

“I experience Divine love every time I’m out in nature — on a mountain, at the beach, in a jungle — I feel much closer to God when I feel the wind, the water, and the world They made.” (35, Malaysia, she/her)

EXERCISE 5

Personal and/or Collective Discussion:

Was there a moment or a memory where you felt, saw, or experienced God’s love for you in your own journey?

Maybe it could’ve even been a person whose very existence in your life felt like a confirmation of a Divine Source and Their attention to you. What changed after that experience?

Some Inspiring Elements of Islam

In this section, you’ll find stories about why we haven’t been able to shake off our status as believers, and what it is about Islam that inspires us comfort and growth. Something to think about while reading this is that it would be misleading to think of Islam as just a system of religious beliefs and practices. Islam is just as validly a social project for managing politics, economy, and law.

Over 1400 years later, Islam is also a cultural and artistic peer of the Chinese civilisation, Western civilisation, Indian civilisation and more, with the architecture and artefacts to show for it. It isn’t always easy or possible to tell which ‘Islam’ is being referred to in conversation. Exercise 6 invites you to consider why being a Muslim is something you choose for yourself. After the sidebar on the tawhidi paradigm for human rights, you’ll meet Exercise 7, an early crowd favourite and possibly the most loved exercise in this book.

When she struggles to move past the idea of God being distant and far away, she remembers this verse from the Qur’an. “God is closer to you than your jugular vein (50:16). Sometimes it’s not easy for me to imagine this. Allah seemed immaterial because I couldn’t see Dia. So when I think of God, I fail every time. But then I think of the proximity in that verse. God, who I cannot visualise, yet is closer to me than anything I can imagine. It’s a paradox, isn’t it? God is pictured as shapeless, distant, formless. Yet is as close to me as the blood under my skin! Sometimes it can be hard to connect with an image like that. So I don’t imagine God as beyond form, but Dia is close to me as my blood flow, as my breathing — both of which I need to pay more attention to anyway. Maybe God is in a breath, a moment we aren’t aware of unconsciously. Spiritually, what is the difference between perceiving something close to us that we cannot see, and something far that we also cannot see? I find it fascinating.”

An inspiring part of Islam for her was the concept of time. “I like how there’s always this sense of continuity I experience when I read the Quran or hadith — like the past is the present, the present is the future, its concept of time is relative and simultaneously timeless. I find that very fascinating. I prefer that openness, instead of saying you’ve done something bad in the past and because of that, you are who you are. You can always be a better person. I like the idea that you can change with time. There’s always an opportunity to change, to look at yourself, not only as an individual but also as part of a bigger entity. Everyone has a soul, the soul has a source, everything returns to Source. I’ve always been obsessed with the image of time as a scroll. It’s not linear. It’s all one and simultaneous. Scientists have been talking about this too, how it’s human nature to think of time as linear but it’s not.”

After almost a decade of embracing Islam, his community work is still informed by the idea of practising faith as a humbling social project. “From very early on I remember one of the things that really inspired me about Islam was just how dedicated Muslims
were, the intentions of the Quran to bring justice to society. There was a sense of something greater than the individual.

"Today I relate to this 'bigger than human' concept in a different way, but one thing that stayed consistent was the de-emphasis on the individual. Not to say we are formless blobs, but the recognition of something greater than us. Something we are a part of. At first for me it was the idea of God. As my understanding of Islam matures, I realise it’s also the idea of a community that is bigger than you.

"The help you give, your contribution to others is also part of serving God. Not just other Muslims, bigger than that! Other communities, religious or non-religious. No man is an island. It's like the Quran says, God has sent different messages to different communities, and we are meant to learn from each other (49:13). At the end of the day it's about humility and recognising you are part of this bigger existence."

As she completes her studies far from her home, she finds the most inspiring element of Islam is community. "I've always been attracted to Muslim communities and how all over the world, there's a sense of bringing people together. The queer Muslim community that we have is very inspiring. We're such an interesting bunch! It's inspiring to meet more queer Muslims, and other Muslims outside of what I know as the majority or mainstream."

"I experience this unspeakable calmness during congregational prayers. Of course I have the privilege of femme visibility, which means I look just like 'them' and that helps. But to feel that calmness, though, even for a second, is something I really cherish about being a Muslim. Being part of the Muslim community or its sub-communities feels like a sense of belonging. We’re always trying to find each other. It reminds me of the basis of Islam, of tawhid, the Oneness of Allah."

OTHER ELEMENTS

"Islam is so vast. It’s not Islam that inspires me so much as other Muslims. We exist within so many intersections, our experiences differ, but there’s a sense of unity that is amazing to be a part of when I'm around other Muslims who are accepting and non-judgemental. Ultimate coexistence is a wonderful thing to feel. We have such a rich history, and we're an essential part of the times too. People deliberately forget that, try to erase Muslim narratives. And despite that we are trying to persevere and build community." (18, USA, she/her)

"The Qur'an itself. There is a mysterious beauty to it that I am finally exploring now I am older, without anyone forcing me to read because I ‘have’ to." (35, queer, she/her)

"The concept of God's Oneness in tawhid, and the Quran, which I continue to learn and be transformed by. From within the Sufi traditions, sohbat to keep company with those who inspire deeper faith and service, dhikr out loud in groups for synchronising the heart with the universe, salah for humility and Divine presence, fasting for surrender to embodiment on earth." (nonbinary, academic, they/them)

"The oneness of Allah. The immediate, no mediation necessary, connection with Him. The kindness of the Prophet. The mercy and kindness inherent in Islam." (30, cis woman, she/her)

"Accountability — that each individual is responsible for their own doings — is a repeated theme in the Quran." (gay femme, Pakistan, he/him)

"If one reads the English translations of most of the surahs we read in prayer, they all ask for guidance, and not things of luxury. That for me is the most important part. Islam is here to guide us, not dictate us." (27, India, she/her)

"Setting one's intentions. I realise that action without intention is empty. While there is an aspect of performing one's faith, I realise that I'm first a human being with flaws, and then I'm a spiritual being with intentions." (trans, Bangladesh, he/him)

"If I had to choose one thing, it’s the Asma ul-Husna, the Beautiful Names of Allah. They have inspired, moved and delighted me ever since I was a child, listening to the nashid on local television. I still hold them in awe and reverence now, after all these years. I cannot hear them being recited or sung in nashid without getting goosebumps." (41, gay, he/him)

"The one thing that I find really beautiful about Islam is that Islam is not hierarchical in its interpretations. Islam doesn't have a kingdom that rules over all interpretations, so every Muslim has their own interpretation. We are not obligated to follow fatwa because every Muslim has their own personal capacity to interpret everything. We have personal authority. We don’t have to follow hierarchical statements or anything. But of course this reality is clouded by politics which makes that hard to practice." (29, Indonesia, he/him)

"When I read the Quran, I understand that women were born capable of freedom. Freedom to marry or not, to be a mother or not, to have their own resources. This inspires me to believe that Islam is not a religion formed to oppress as we see in the

community." (18, USA, she/her)
generations.” (bsexual, artist, she/her)

“The concepts of mercy, forgiveness, and inclusiveness.” (social worker, Malaysia, he/him)

“The emphasis on cleanliness — I can’t imagine using just toilet paper honestly.” (bsexual, journalist, she/her)

“The uniqueness of recitation, chanting, dhikr — which I learned through Sufism. A scholar, I can’t remember who, said that the highest dhikr in Islam is contemplating. Sitting down, thinking about God, seeing God in everything. One of my sheikhs told me that you don’t even need to say His name, because everything you see has His name.” (55, Singapore, she/her)

“Islam’s emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge and embracing change as the most fundamental reality of our existence gives me goosebumps. Most orthodox believers look at Islam as a religion that is out of time and place, a sort of ‘fixed’ ideal society. Looking forward to embracing change as the reality of life inspires me particularly, and helps me look at the Quran as a text bestowed upon us for all ages and generations.” (academic, trans, he/him)

EXERCISE 6

Personal:  
What about Islam do you find personally inspiring?  
Why is ‘Muslim’ a persistent or resonant part of your identity?

Collective Discussion:  
Discuss the answers in this section.  
Which do you agree with, and what would you add to the list?

WHATEVER MAKES YOU BETTER

Many of the voices in this project do not believe that Islam is actually superior to other faiths. They validate many paths to the Divine, even as they locate themselves as Muslim for reasons such as familiarity, upbringing, praxis, and frameworks.

Despite an entire life spent in Islamic studies, he doesn’t believe there is anything special about ‘choosing’ Islam over any religion. “I chose Islam personally because I was born into it, am familiar with Muslim culture, methodologies, and environment.”

He instead sees faith as a practice developing in its own unique process and time. “Say we are building a table. We’ll need input — things to make a table with, like wood, nails, a saw. We need process — in this case it’s woodworking. Then we have the output, which is a table of course. If in the process, the carpenter is someone with experience, the table will look quite good, even if plain in shape or pattern. But someone who has explored and seen many other tables might decide to express that in their table a certain way. I think having faith is like this. Different religions have different inputs and processes.”

He demonstrates with the example of prayer. “With a ritual like prayer, what Allah says about it is that prayer helps you avoid what is bad for you. So we don’t pray for God, we pray to prevent ourselves from harm, which is to say we pray to be a better person, sibling, child, parent, friend, neighbour, citizen. Many say to me: If I become a Muslim there are so many rituals. I am someone who believes in rituals and adheres to them strictly. But Islam is bigger than ritual. If you pray but you are corrupt, if you pray but oppress others, what is the point anyway? It’s not about the form, it’s about the substance.”

He relates a hadith where the Prophet Muhammadﷺ first arrives to Madinah. “When people asked him what Islam is, he said: Islam is to spread peace, that which is good. Feed the hungry. Connect together and do not argue. Pray in the dead of night when everyone is asleep and doesn’t see you. So he prioritises being a good person, feeding the needy, making peace. The ritual itself comes last, and isn’t even witnessed by anyone. Whether you pray or not, what if you can somehow make sure others are safer?”

At its core, what matters is that one’s spirituality yields a praxis of harm reduction and kindness. “Underlying all religions is the call to be better, from Buddhism to Christianity. Even non-religious people still aim for the same. The end goal for all people is to be kind and decent to ourselves and to all life, plants and creatures included. There isn’t anything inherently special about any particular religion, what is special is that we become a better person. If even without religion you can still achieve that, then you should. There are many ways to the same destination. At the end of the day, if it can make you better, then go ahead. God will not look at our religion, but what we did with other people and living beings. That’s why there are so many hadith where the Prophet Muhammadﷺ says one has no iman as long as they don’t love others the way they love themselves, or one is not a believer who goes to bed while their neighbour is hungry. It makes sense. How can a person sleep easily knowing their neighbour is starving? Religion is just a medium. It’s everyone that matters.”
radiates from one Source and participates in Allah's unity. This means singularity that cannot be divided yet created everything, everything (4:116), because it's the direct opposite of tawhid. Because Allah is the direct opposite of Allah's oneness. This is why shirk is the only unforgivable sin (4:116), because it's the direct opposite of tawhid because Allah is a singularity that cannot be divided yet created everything, everything radiates from one Source and participates in Allah's unity. This means no matter how it seems externally, ultimate separation between Creator and creature or one and another is internally just an illusion. When presenting the tawhidic paradigm, amina often shares a quote from the Catholic St. Augustine: "Imagine that God is a circle, the center of which is everywhere, and the circumference of the circle is nowhere." Applied to a 3D world, God is a sphere of reality: "Allah is present in the most minute thing and also in the most expansive capacity we have to imagine, for example our universe." Therefore, every human-human relation can be represented as a triad with Allah as the third (58:7). This can be imperfectly imagined as a triangle, where Allah occupies the highest moral point and two persons (or groups of people) are sustained hierarchically to each other instead of hierarchically. This means, to accept Allah's presence means to understand that there can only be a non-hierarchical relationship of horizontal (or equal) reciprocity between anyone else.

This also aligns with how Allah only distinguishes between us on the basis of our taqwa (49:13). Taqwa, often translated as moral consciousness, is also described in the Quran as something beyond our capacity to perceive in others. Yet taqwa factors largely in our own agency in the world (khilafah) — if a consciousness of Allah is absent, it becomes possible to think of others along non-horizontal lines of inequality, transgression, oppression, and abuse. "You can't be ethical by yourself," amina says. From an Islamic framework, "the notion of ethical behaviour involves honouring another person because of a deep awareness of the presence of Allah at all times."

In the Quran, all Things are part of a system of dualism (51:49). That is to say, everything comes in pairs. Some of these pairs coexist as complementary contingent equals, such as a pair of gloves, or the human and jinn as sibling species. Others are mutually necessary opposites, such as day or night, up or down. All of creation is interconnected this way, but since Allah is not like Things (42:11), Allah is the rejection holding the pairs in balance and her occupying the highest moral point at all times. As amina points out, "The Qur'an never says we were created from a male person. The first person was Adam, an entity that has what is essential to all of us — a naqṣ and a soul. When Iblis says 'I am better than Adam', he places himself as better than the other (istikbar), and that is the foundation of all forms of oppression and discrimination."

Muhammad ﷺ was reported to have said "One of you does not believe until they love for the other what is loved for the self." In traditional mono-narrative systems, for a long time, gender was seen as a spectrum. "It was just accepted that some people clearly manifest masculine and feminine in one body," amina says. In her research of the first 500 years of Islamic fiqh, she observes that the fiqh was strongly in favour of inclusion. For example, "the emphasis on creating a prayer space for intersex persons was in everybody's fiqh.

The tawhidic paradigm also reflects itself in other sources of knowledge such as the golden rule of reciprocity, the Mandelbrot set (sometimes called the thumbprint of God) or the yin yang, an ancient Chinese philosophy of dualism. "There is no absolute positively completely 100% male and only male, there is no absolutely

Sidebar 2.

The Tawhidic Paradigm for Human Rights

This sidebar is a humble (and frankly nerve-wracking) attempt to briefly summarise decades of Professor amina wadud’s life work into an accessible starting point for sexually diverse people. I recommend reading her book Inside the Gender Jihad (2006) to read her elaboration of the tawhidic paradigm. I felt the need to include this sidebar because of the paradigm’s practical implications (it underlies much of SIS and Musawah’s work in sidebar 1). It’s exciting to imagine the potential of the tawhidic paradigm as a framework for generations of sexually diverse Muslims.

This is a brief adventure into the world of Islamic ethics. Tawhid is a fundamental Islamic principle, often translated to as ‘monotheism’, but as we’ll see, there are more layers to it than that. The tawhidic paradigm asks us to consider how our recognition of Allah’s singularity manifests in the way we live life.

Why does this matter? Knowing you have a personal relationship with God doesn’t mean it is immediately clear how to connect that to a sense of authority — or full ownership to participate in producing knowledge from within an Islamic framework, engaging with primary sources. Doing so can go a long way to resisting mono-narratives constructed from blindly accepting long-held interpretations of the faith, including our own internalised queerphobia and misogyny. Through her work, amina wadud offers a structure for activism, and describes the paradigm as why she became Muslim to begin with.

I’ve come to think of tawhid as a core operating system (OS) that connects my physical and metaphysical realities. This is a metaphor I adopted after encountering amina wadud’s explanations of the tawhidic paradigm a few times. Much like my devices, I need to upgrade my OS to keep myself functional. ‘Upgrading’ my tawhid is to then consider how my understanding of Allah changes and affects my beliefs as I grow — either by accepting ‘downloads’ others have made for me, or learning to code my own ‘upgrades’ for wellbeing and activism. Naturally, this also changes how I see myself along the way.

Theologically, tawhid relates to how Allah is not only one and unique, Allah is also uniform and unites. Because of tawhid, all of Islam exists along the lines of the indisputable and unconditional idea of Allah’s oneness. This is why shirk is the only unforgivable sin (4:116), because it’s the direct opposite of tawhid. Because Allah is a singularity that cannot be divided yet created everything, everything radiates from one Source and participates in Allah’s unity. This means...
positively 100% female. There is a spectrum. And not only that, looking at that yin yang symbol which is about the masculine and feminine, there is always the manifestation of the other within each.” In presentations, amina also loves sharing this poem she heard recited from a trans person in Africa: “My God is not a woman, my God is not a man, my God is both and neither, my God is who I am.”

The paradigm inspires us to remove stratification from all levels of interaction: public, private, ritual, political. Since the ultimate intention of Islam is reciprocity and not hegemony, this ethic was first applied to gender relations in the family by SIS and Musawah, and can be applied to all human relations. amina wadud lists its potential applications in human rights debates “including women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, antiracism, antisexism, anti-ableism, and other counter-oppression movements within an Islamic framework.”

Since Allah is a circle with the center of everywhere and a circumference of nowhere, in each of us is an essence (dhat) reflecting our union with this cosmic design. We can choose to ignore this transcendent reality and emphasise the illusion of external superiority over others — or we can recognise the transcendent reality in all living beings and relate to each other in a reciprocal way.

EXERCISE 7

Personal and/or Collective Discussion:
Visualise your own sense of authority and connection to the Divine. In a blank rectangle, design your own prayer mat. Imagine a mat that welcomes your feet, hands, and forehead — a portal that helps you show up. Be as simple or detailed as you like!
Intersectional Paths to the Divine

In this section, a Muslim falls in love with the Psalms. A genderfluid person finds their way back to Islam by honouring their ancestors. A teacher assigns his students time with a community of sex workers. A woman is inspired by indigenous communities to see God in nature. An autistic person obsessed with knowledge discovers that everything they learned was to prepare themselves to reconsider the Qur'an. We look at how queer Muslims have developed their understanding of the Divine by engaging with diverse traditions and communities — and invite you to do the same in Exercise 8. Before heading into the last part of the book, you’re invited to walk through the Four-Arched Portal of Rahma in our third sidebar and in Exercise 9.

INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

When the queer movement seems too secular, or Muslim-majority societies too hostile, sexually diverse Muslims can find solace and solidarity in other queers of faith. Some of us fall in love across faiths. Sexually diverse Muslims and Christians are exploring interfaith spiritual community work together, such as in Indonesia (see Part 3’s sidebar: Reevaluating a social emphasis on procreation and proliferation.)

He is in a civil partnership with an openly gay Anglican priest. “Our civil partnership last year was as fully significant to us as a wedding — whether or not the Church of England lets us refer to it as ‘marriage’. It was an unabashedly interfaith ceremony, presided over by a male priest and female imam. We’re pretty privileged to live in England lets us refer to it as ‘marriage’. It was an unabashedly interfaith ceremony, presided over by a male priest and female imam. We’re pretty privileged to live in comfortable housing provided by the Church of England. We’re not rich but we’re secure. I juggle work as a part-time academic, journalist and activist, specialising in religion and social justice. My areas of interest are the experiences of minorities as well as the climate emergency. My husband is also a spiritual activist of sorts. He’s a full-time vicar with his own parish church who also works on greater inclusion for LGBTQI people in the Church of England, interfaith climate action, urban homelessness and youth unemployment.”

The path to his current life is bittersweet, but the journey refined his energy and attention to the Divine. “I’m married to a wonderful man whom I get to share my quirky, off-centre but deep spirituality with, and we’re very much accepted and cherished by both our Christian and Muslim communities. It’s a fairy tale bubble in some ways. But there’s also rising Islamophobia and xenophobia across the UK, and many Muslim communities remain deeply uncomfortable and even hostile to issues of gender and sexual diversity.

“One other challenge is my complex family situation in Malaysia. The women in the family are supportive and accepting of me and my husband, but my dad is more hostile. It has made me reevaluate the meaning of family and where I put my energy into in terms of the relationships I want to nurture. It’s made me extremely attuned to what the signs or ayat of God’s grace and bounty are, which includes many of the people around me who have turned out to be angels even though I don’t share

He also reflects on how a concept of God may work for him, but does not always map across all divine experiences. “I’ve learned that ‘God’ can be a very exclusivist and even draconian concept for some people. It’s a term that is alien to many Buddhists and probably indigenous peoples too. Who am I to impose the word ‘God’ onto their spiritualities? Who am I to be so arrogant as to translate their experiences as being about ‘God’? Who am I to call them polytheists or animists? At the same time, I want to honour the fact that the idea of ‘God’ works for me. But I remind myself to always accept that I cannot trap ‘God’ in a bottle or a box that has my name written on it and pretend that it’s something everyone else can identify with.”

The reality of his faith is informed by continuous engagement with multiple others. “My mother comes from a non-Muslim and multi-faith background, so I’ve always been nurtured by Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism. In the UK, my husband and I share a house with an observant Jewish lodger, and we have often celebrated our own versions of Hanukkah and Pesach with him before he celebrates these festivals with his own (multi-faith) family.

“From Christianity, I have learnt about kenosis (self-emptying), the Examen (a meditative practice), Christ’s Passion and Resurrection. From Judaism, I have learnt about creative scriptural exegesis and ‘arguing with God’ as a spiritual practice. From both, I have acquired an abiding love for the Psalms, especially Psalm 42 (As a deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, o God) and Psalm 84 (How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts, to me).

“From Hinduism, I have learnt to love a pantheon of flawed yet intimate and passionate gods and deities, and have adopted Lord Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, armed with his broken tusk as his writing implement, as my guide as I wade my way through the Abrahamic scriptures. And to be more specific, I’ve learnt a lot from spiritualities of the dispossessed and the marginalised. I’ve learnt so much from engaging with the Black Christ, Black feminist perspectives of Christianity, postcolonial interpretations of the Bible - this study of liberatory Christian spiritualities has helped me to approach Islam in new and fresh ways.”

He is currently grappling with an old message from the mystics. “The mystics in pretty much all the religions have this idea that we need to self-empty or annihilate our ego to achieve union with the Divine. It’s a powerful thought. But how can you tell marginalised people at risk who are already told they are nothing to think of themselves as nothing? How can you empty yourself of a self you have been told you had no right to celebrate or express? But I think our spiritual teachings contain enough resources that tell us to own our particular experience, to celebrate the Divine spark that is there in each and every one of us, and to see it in other people too.”
Feeling shut out and traumatised by their family, they reconnected with their ancestral roots as a Muslim. “I had a very interfaith and multi-dimensional pathway back to Islam, which was really fun! Through ancestral work, I reconnected with my Sufi heritage. Through trauma release and memory work, I learned to accept my spiritual gifts. Before this though, I had begun observing Hindu and Buddhist practices whatever felt right for me. In healing, at that time, I would accept. This would look like devotional communion with specific deities, understanding them as part of the Divine Oneness, of The Universe expressing itself through these fractals of energy that we, as humans, have assigned stories and myths and theology to. I welcomed meditative practices using the breath, voice, and mantras, learning the medicinal value of sound. I lived near a Kali temple for a while and spent that year understanding her as a reflection for femininity justice, then I worked with a Buddhist teacher for another year to deepen my meditation practice.”

Throughout the process, they slowly reintroduced themself to the parts of the Islamic devotional practices that they could find joy and safety in, “like dhikr and reciting the Qur’an specifically to listen and understand its sounds. I observed the energies and resonance of the surahs, especially the more mystical ones. Because so much of the abuse I experienced was connected to other people trying to control my relationship with God and Spirit, and because they had used Islamic dogma to perpetuate the abuse, I could not find the same comfort in Islamic prayer that I perused the abuse, I could not find the same comfort in Islamic prayer that I...”. (nonbinary, Pakistan, they/them)

Tending to those roots, however, allowed them the footholds they needed to claim their right to identify as a Muslim. “I’m Muslim because through this journey, I have learned that the practice of spirituality is essentially the practice of Oneness, and Islam is the practice of surrendering to this Divine Oneness, with all its multitudes and variations grounded in human compassion. In the human realm, we experience this Oneness when we’re able to view opposing realities as part of the same whole, and we still teach and exercise grace — the radical acceptance of ourselves and others — accepting the likeness between all things whether seen or unseen. The Sufis spent their lives mapping out the mystic’s path. For me, that path doesn’t just exist in our collective or ancestral memories. It’s a path that’s very real and very present in our current reality, in the Now. Islam encourages me to walk this path with grace.”

“I feel like all faiths, at their core, are similar and teach similar values of kindness and mercy to everyone and every living creature.” (queer, Egypt, she/her)

“I grew up Muslim, but I also grew up with my Orthodox Christian Armenian family. I felt isolated at functions, but seeing how similar our practices and beliefs opened my eyes. People had different ideas for what spirituality was, but it still mattered very greatly to them. My mom and aunty are Catholic, and learning about saints as their meanings as well as the Orishas of Santería has given me a broader understanding and respect for the world I live in. I give thanks to Yemaya when I visit the ocean, and when my Armenian mom feels like going to church I’ll light a candle with her. My Cuban grandma died a couple of years ago, and I was given a tiny Virgin statue that belonged to her. I keep it in her memory. In this sense I co-exist amongst other religions and maintain respect for all of them. I don’t think we should be able to be open about what our spirituality does and doesn’t consist of.” (18, USA, she/her)

“The Sufiks are a monotheistic faith as well. I think Sikhism and Islam differ in emphasis on ritual and spirituality, but the shared idea is there. The Sufiks I have met in particular are very grounded in this world. Of course there’s this idea of doing good, the afterworld, salvation of the soul, but it is intrinsically linked to doing good to those around you, earning an honest living. My Sikh friends told me one of the first Gurus admonished the mystics of the time who were in caves and did not participate in their communities. I like that idea of living in a community, and not being your own island. I think our religions are relatively intertwined. I always tell my Muslim friends, if you want to explore interfaith perspectives somewhere, start with the Sufiks. As a Muslim, you’ll feel some form of affinity with their philosophies, aesthetics, teachings, and with the Sufiks themselves.” (25, Singapore, he/him)

“I enjoy the meditative practices from Buddhism and Hinduism. I love how khanqahs and shrines of Sikh saints distribute food and cater to the needs of those who don’t have means to live.” (cis woman, Malaysia, she/her)

“The Noble Eightfold Path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi. I mean, I’m not a Buddhist, and I’m a long way from doing any of those perfectly, but they are very good practices to engage in.” (cis woman, Malaysia, she/her)

“Being with each other strengthens our own faiths. I think the fact that we have ‘different’ faiths (personally, I think it’s the same!) means there’s no internal faith competition to be more alim than the other person, which can happen a lot in the Malay Muslim community. She and I can grow together at our own pace. I love going to the occasional church service with her. The community in church is very unlike what I see in mosques here. It is more integrated and accepting. Most churches here still aren’t open to fully accepting queer folks, but there’s a refreshing lack of ‘I’m older therefore I know better’ or gender segregation. Plus the music is nice too.” (cis woman, Malaysia, she/her)
REFINING FAITH THROUGH COMMUNITY ENCOUNTERS

When he assigned his Islamic jurisprudence students to meet marginalised communities, it challenged them to reconcile their learnings with reality. "Many of my students change after I bring them to meet sex workers for their assignments. Especially the men! Until that point, these students had only been reading texts without looking at reality. Since I still had to teach the texts, I finished the syllabus in half the time, and the remaining half I assigned them a few topics and sent them to listen and observe the sex workers I taught Qur'an to at the time. Islamic jurisprudence is very dry, it's about issuing court judgements. I got them to meet low-income cis and trans sex workers, gay men, and the urban poor. In all of them, the students who were most affected were the ones who met the sex workers. At first they wouldn't even eat anything that sex workers bought them. They were shocked to see these women reciting the Qur'an in class."

After all the time they spent learning fiqh and going out on assignment, one male group’s final presentation had just a single slide. “Why? The group leader said: ‘This is a male group, how will we issue the hukum? We can go meet them and say this is haram, show them Quran verses. But at the end of the day, the satisfaction is only ours. The issue of sex workers is not an individual issue. It’s a family issue, national issue, and systemic issue. If they are not sex workers, how else can they survive?’ So I asked him, what about the prohibitions on these things in the kitab? He said, ‘There are times when fiqh responds to reality not with Quranic text or hadith. There are times when holding space and connection with someone, telling them: I am with you. That too is fiqh.”

What was on their one slide? “A quote from Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawyziyah from his kitab I’lam Al-Muwaqiin ‘An Rabbil Alamin that said: Verily shariah is built on justice, compassion, and humanity. Whoever uses religious interpretations to justify cruelty, oppression, and discrimination has no part in shariah even if they lean on Quranic verses and hadith. That was it! That was their slide.”

HEALING THROUGH THE EXPLORATION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

They grew up in an analogue childhood with a firm sense of obligation but also space to develop an obsessive curiosity. “My parents may have restricted me in other ways, but they let me read anything I could read. If my mother were to describe me as a child to you, she would say I liked reading more than people. I wasn’t an easy child, but I was quiet and could be left unattended in any space if there was reading material to flip through. Magazines, books, other people’s books, packaging, flyers in the mail. I read everything.”

They later realised this was one of many signs indicating their minimal-support autism — and their journey to the Divine was through obsessive curiosity. “I had to move out as a teenager and live in different places around the city. I couldn’t hold down an office job as well as I could freelance, so I did a lot of different work to survive and learned a little about a lot — from skills to trivia. Sometimes I would travel alone to be with myself, come back and start again. Life wasn’t always stable, but it was a privilege to have a clear split between my privacy and family, to see where building my inner world would take me. I associated religion with family at the time, so that did not come along with me at first. But the internet turned any room I was in into some portal or spaceship of knowledge. Every topic I read about as a child I could extend indefinitely because of what was online.”

However, the Quran eluded them. Even when much else about receiving faith was overwhelming and didn’t stick, they would reread the Quran once in a while, only to...
realise they’ve never really read it. “I’m the kind of person who checks if I still don’t like a certain food, just in case it’s different this time. Although I had a lot of Quran memorised and recited it twice through completely under the eye of a mosque imam every week — I had no idea what I was saying. The same for prayer. I didn’t understand what I was doing or saying, so it was easy to stop when no one was watching. But sometimes — out of the blue living my heathen life — I would recall entire verses hardwired from childhood, and I’d go to the Quran to find out the meaning of what they were, and it was like reading it for the first time. I was like, did I really read you before? Why couldn’t I?”

When they learned more in their late 20s about power, human rights, and queerness — all roads led them to the unresolved baggage of their past. “I don’t know if this is a privilege or a tragedy, but in Malaysia it was easy for me not to be perceived by others as Muslim. Nevertheless, I hit a wall with my discomfort of being a queer person who could not bring themself to renounce God forever. I didn’t like it when anyone assumed I was an atheist, but at this point, I felt I’d lose respect from friends if I decided I was Muslim ‘again’ without any information to defend myself from the idea that having faith was oppressive or made me oppressed. I also felt spaces that were Muslim would try to change me if they knew I wasn’t straight. There was a feeling that whatever I was could never be unpacked with others without it going beyond my control. I didn’t know where I could stand in this power struggle, because I couldn’t hold an idea of God. It wasn’t hard to make a list of upsetting things I’ve heard about God or Islam to me that I’ve retained — a list of anything that blocked me from believing.”

Armed with a list of questions and files, they decided to befriend the Quran once again, paying attention to its Arabic this time. “I wanted to understand what I had been taught to say, to memorise. At the same time, there was also the process of changing my mind with new awareness of the world in other things, and unlearning what I had internalised in the past.”

This time, the Quran’s certainty resonated. “I didn’t understand what it meant to see God in everything — until I saw the Quran differently. By that I mean in recognising that it had a cinematography of its own, how the grammar can mark the text in a way that feels like a scene cutting to the next, a wide shot, a close-up. How rhymes felt, and when a word choice is a clue.”

After that re-encounter with the text, everything they knew or discovered took them back to it again. “Even if it seems really unrelated to ‘Islam’ at first, I could connect it to God and the Quran in a few ways — and in ways that increased my understanding and appreciation for both. From how honey bees are responsible for one in three meals that humans eat, to math equations explaining the designs of life, how observing the flight of birds led to the discovery of electromagnetic waves. The
help me change energies in my home and life. Burning incense or sage to cleanse the air. Lighting candles to remind me of light. Sacred music from multiple traditions to clear the mind and focus the heart. Dance from my African traditional religion ancestors. Communing with goddess and the divine feminine, which again started from outside of Islam but now is integrated within Islam through the attributes of the Oneness of Allah." (60s, nonbinary, they/them)

“Learning about neo-pagan spirituality and their emphasis on the female energy and Goddess. I know Allah is supposed to be gender neutral but in reality They are too often tainted by patriarchy and I want to see Them more as a benevolent gender-neutral entity (what some people might call ‘The Universe’) rather than a punishing father.” (38, teacher, she/her)

**Sidebar 3:**

**The Four-Arched Portal of Rahma**

What do we do when encountering social rhetoric, Qur’anic verses, and Prophetic hadith that seemingly violate the higher ethical principles of the Qur’an: love (muwaddah), rahma, beauty (insan), justice (’adl), and equity (qist)? Dr Ghazala Anwar offers the Qur’anic portal of Rahma to negotiate this apparent challenge to our faith.

The fourfold portal of Rahma is what Dr Ghazala refers to as the basic principles of Quranic engagement. In conversation, she says she favours the term ‘engagement’ here over similar terms like ‘interpretation’ or ‘hermeneutics.’

“This is because ihsan is not something you give a lecture on, it’s something you embody, an engagement that informs us from the inside.”

What I also find striking about Dr Ghazala’s approach to the Qur’an is her focus on the Arabic grammatical gender fluidity within each verse, and the potential that opens up to exploring gender fluidity in ourselves, since we are all composed of a ‘feminine’ nafs and ‘masculine’ insan. To demonstrate and respect that aspect of her work, I include (f) and (m) in the verse translations below. My spiritual practice has been all the more better by encountering South Asian thought and culture, and I am grateful to Dr Ghazala for sharing her knowledge with us in this sidebar in her own words:

**The Four Arched Portal of Rahma: The Meta-Ethic of Islam**

1) The Basmalah — the first invocation is Rahma

*In the name of Allah (f), the Loving (m), the Kind (m) (al-Fatiha 1:1)*

The basmallah, the very first and most recited Quranic verse is a declaration, invocation, commitment and goal. It declares that Allah is widely and indiscriminately loving, kind and merciful to every individual life. It invokes this Rahma upon the reciter of the basmallah, it binds the reciter’s actions to this Rahma and it hopes for an outcome that is Rahma. It brings Allah’s Rahmaniyyah to the front, out of which the world is created; and Allah’s Rahimiyyah, through which each creature in this world is sustained and cared for through continuous and repeated acts of Rahma. Both Rahman and Rahim are rooted in ‘rahm’, the womb, the loving and nurturing source of life.

**EXERCISE 8**

**Personal:**

Has anything you learned from your ancestors, other faiths, practices, or communities brought you closer to God?

How have these rituals or practices affected your ideas of what shirk is and isn’t?

**Collective Discussion:**

Shirk, as the obstacle to justice: Let’s revisit shirk, which all Muslims agree is the biggest sin against God. Some of the answers in this section may have been portrayed to you as shirk in the past. Discuss the tension between finding inclusive ways to the Divine and associating something the equivalent power of Allah. How does resisting shirk play out in your work to resist or transform existing power structures?
2) The Primordial Kitab Allah — Divine Self-Inscription is Rahma

He(m) wrote Rahma(f) upon him(m)/Self(f) (al-An’am 6:12, 6:54)

Allah, the Ahad (the One 11:13), wrote rahma upon Allah’s Self, this is the primordial and eternal Kitab Allah (Allah’s kitab-writing) out of which all the scriptures revealed to all the Prophets ensue. It is through the experience of Rahma that we comprehend Tawheed; and it is in the practice of Rahma that we practice Tawheed and it is with the eyes of Rahma that we see that any religion that teaches and prioritizes Rahma: loving kindness, compassion, empathy, sympathy, forgiveness, abstention from violence and cruelty, is upholding Tawheed, because Allah, the One wrote compassion upon Allah’s Self: Rahma is the identity and reference of Allah’s Oneness. Allah’s inscription of Rahma upon Divine Self which has no form, elevates it over all other Divine attributes. Rahma is what defines Allah’s presence in this world and in the next, and in the inner orientation of all persons of faith.

3) The Qur’an is Rahma

We(incl) send down in the Quran(m) healing(m) and Rahma(f) for the faithful(incl) but it increases the wrongdoers(m.incl) only in loss(m) (al-Isra 17:82)

Faith in Allah who has written Rahma upon Divine Self, is the pre-condition for accessing the Rahma from Allah’s Kitab. Experiencing and practicing Rahma for the sake of Allah, is healing for us individually and for the entire creation except for the oppressors. When we feel oppressed, let us find simple ways to practice Rahma upon ourselves and upon others — free a caged bird, or smile at a stranger, for the sake of Allah’s pleasure and it will heal our hearts and our breath, our emotions and our spirit (10:57) and make a way out of oppression for us. Practice of Rahma entails developing our hearing and seeing so we can hear a plant that is thirsty and see that a caged bird longs to feel the wind under its open wings.

4) The Propheticﷺ Mission is Rahma

And We(incl) did not send you(m) except as Rahma(f) to all the worlds(m) (al-Anbiya 21:107)

The Prophet’sﷺ mission in the world is Rahma and so the mission of Prophet’s ummah is Rahma. This reveals a shared connection between prophetic attributes, human attributes, and Divine attributes. It is in Rahma that all the hierarchies dissolve. While meditating on Allah we must foremost Rahma, while reading Allah’s book we must find or choose the understandings that foreground Rahma, while emulating the sunnah of the Prophet through reference to particular hadith we must determine if it is Rahma for all the realms of existence. While reciting the basmallah we must be aware that we are committing ourselves to Rahma. The deeper this commitment the more profound its manifestation in our own life inshallah.

The portal of rahma helps us engage with and evaluate Qur’an verses, hadiths, and other discourse as Muslims from a lens of kindness and compassion. Rahman is used to refer to Allah throughout the Qur’an in a way that no other of Allah’s 99 Names (Asma ul-Husna) are used. Because rahma is foregrounded, when we consider their possible meanings, we must choose the ones that display the most Rahma, simply because these four elements are no accident. InshaAllah this portal can help inform your own engagement with faith, identity, and activism.
Welcome to the last part of this offering! If you’ve been reading this book in sequence, I imagine you must have literally gone through so much.

So we close this book with a very different kind of section. First, you’ll read a few letters we received when asking queer Muslims to write to their younger selves. You’re invited to write one too in Exercise 10. Then we’ll share a few things we wished everyone else could learn from people like us (including our final sidebar), and you’re invited to add to the list in Exercise 11.

Lastly, we asked everyone we spoke to about the world they imagine for themselves, and what they are grateful for. As you might expect, these two questions make up Exercises 12 and 13, the last of the book.

Thank you for holding space for all these voices. I hope you feel less alone in the most visible generation of sexually diverse Muslims, and return here again and again, by yourself or with friends new and old.

And the future will be better for you than the past.

Surah Ad-Dhuhaa, Qur’an 93:4
GRATITUDE AND PRAISE

“Dear past self,
Your journey brings me to realise how wonderful I am now. Your journey makes me realise there’s nothing to be afraid of. Whatever obstacles we went through, we went through together. We will always have each other’s backs.” (55, masculine cis woman, she/her)

“Don’t hate yourself.
The One who created you? You are Her reflection.” (nonbinary, Pakistan, they/Them)

“Hello younger self,
Trust Allah and allow yourself to feel, to be soft and vulnerable. Don’t harden your heart. It’s all going to be okay inshaAllah. It’s a process, but you’re both strong and soft and you will get through it.” (30, Egypt, she/her)

“You will be loved.
You will not have to sacrifice being who you really are to find love. Also, there is a good reason why you liked the Sailor Scouts more than Tuxedo Mask when you were watching Sailor Moon at age 6.” (29, bisexual, she/her)

“You’re right.
Your dreams were right too. The world as we knew it died with us and when we came back, the world began rebirthing itself in the name of Love. Everything we knew kept changing. Again and again. Our life, this life, becomes a ceaseless wonder. We fall in love with it, deeply. Again and again. Many extraordinary things happen, like coming home to the heart, like reciting Ad-Dhuha during sunrise, like being called Beloved by another human being, like lightning beacons of
hope through the things you make with your hands. These are all miracles. You’re right. If it isn’t done for Love, it’s not worth doing. I thank you with every day of my life for teaching me that every day is a new prayer, a renewed commitment to the self as an expression of love.” (30, pansexual, she/they)

REMININDERS AND ACCEPTANCE

"Don’t think you know everything yet. Stay humble and continue to learn, because there is so much for you to learn. This applies to all my younger selves. When I was an angry atheist, I knew for certain that all religious people were delusional. I even thought I knew myself, that I would be this and that forever. But no, in both cases I did not know! I needed to sit the f**k down. The world is bigger than you know, so keep learning.” (25, gay, he/him)

"Hi my love, You are so hec**ng mean to yourself! My God, so what if you get happy watching athletes do their splits? You did not need to cry in front of your classmates and slap yourself 3 times for thinking it would be nice to date your hot school senior. Do not be scared of Allah, do not think everything you do will put you in hell. Do not lose hope that Allah is close to you. Your family will never be your safe space, but they are your relief and happy space, so hold on to them dearly despite it. Savoir your favourite sweets because soon you will rarely get them. You will never forgive your abuser but that’s your right. Empathy is such a good trait to have my love, and whatever you do not want for yourself, do not do it to anyone else.” (27, bisexual, she/her)

"Dear younger self, Before you date someone please ask them: Do you hate being a Muslim? Do you hate being lesbian? Ask frankly: Do you hate yourself? Will you marry someone if your parents force you to? If they say yes, don’t date them! You will save yourself time and 6 exes. I’m only saying this because I know you won’t listen if I say: Wait until your 30s to date, when everyone’s insecurities have settled down a bit.” (45, housewife, she/her)

"Hello younger me, Be patient, and keep fighting for a better life for yourself. Loneliness is a normal thing. We need to learn to be alone, being lonely in our childhood is just part of being human. We do not have to fight our loneliness, but accept it. Maybe God is lonely and They created us as Themselves, diverse and lonely. If you don’t try to be happy just to find the ‘right’ person to be with forever, life will be so much easier.” (31, Kyrgyzstan, she/her)

"Be patient with yourself. Whatever you are experiencing today is temporary. You will learn new things, enter different situations, meet different people, and get new perspectives. Unfortunately this takes time. But wisdom takes time, and you must ask yourself to be open to new things always.” (39, Malaysia, she/her)

“God is not scary, God is your friend. There is no substitute for effort, and God helps those who help themselves. Some hard years are to come, but when you accept your true self, you will be really happy. God is not scary, God is your friend.” (bisexual, India, she/her)

"Dear younger me, Learn, seek, find. Then practice to serve humanity and help others. That’s all Islam says.” (trans woman, Pakistan, she/her)
"Honestly, I would say nothing to her. She needed to figure things out on her own." (35, queer, she/her)

“I wouldn’t say anything to my younger self, but I would hug the s*** out of her. That’s what I would do, just be there. There are things words cannot express, and I wish someone had just been there and witnessed me, saw me, and be present.” (38, Malaysia, she/her)

**EXERCISE 10**

**Personal:**
Write a message to your past self. Reflect on what you know now, and imagine you could send a message back in time to your younger self.

**Collective Discussion:**
How do we talk to ourselves? Discuss which letters stuck with you and why. For more points of discussion:

- Comfort or motivation? What would you have liked to hear at different points in your journey? How does it differ from how you talked to yourself at the time?
- Hello from the future: What would you say in a letter to past ancestors? Would you address sexually diverse Muslims, or another audience?
Sidebar 4: Re-evaluating a Social Emphasis on Procreation and Proliferation

You may have heard before that sexually diverse Muslims are deviants because our relationships allegedly disrupt reproduction. A Singaporean I spoke to for this project said, "Muslims who aren’t inclusive believe that homosexuality is not natural for humans. Their understanding of ‘natural’ is that you procreate to reproduce the species. Some conservative Muslims are very similar to the Stoic thinkers, and believe that sex is only for procreative purposes. But we need to explore other ways: adoption, helping single parents, or LGBT people who want to raise children."

I was excited to discover that in the same year I wrote this, GAY NUSANTARA Indonesia released a booklet made by and for queers of faith called Christian-Islam Progressive Interpretations of Gender Diversity and Sexuality. The booklet was the result of discussions between Indonesian Muslim and Christian study leaders, gender academics, and activists. By popular demand, it was translated into English from Bahasa Indonesia.

The booklet lists 9 common issues used to justify a doctrine of hatred towards the LGBTQI community. One of the core messages of the booklet was a call to reevaluate a long-held emphasis in Muslims on the importance of procreation and proliferation. Here is my attempt to summarise some of their points around it:

1. **Framing the complex Muslim mission of building an ummah as just a numbers game has implications on the way Muslims themselves are viewed.** “The number of people becomes a determining factor signifying the strength and power of a big religion. Ensuring offspring aggregation is pivotal to achieve this quantity-based power.”

2. **The immense emphasis on proliferation made fertility an ‘indispensable quality.’** Following this logic, the biggest strongest ummah is one where everyone contributes to the cause of procreation.

3. **What is the effect of this perspective? Sexual diversity is seen as a threat to the goals of procreation.** ‘Effeminate or less masculine men are considered detrimental because they are presumed not to marry or reproduce.’ People who can give birth are seen merely as ovens for future Muslims, and infertile people are considered lesser human beings. In many civilisations all over the world, the ability to reproduce is considered the most important factor for marriage.

4. **The reality is Allah has confirmed infertile or non-procreating people are manifestations of Their creative will (42:50).** There is no command to exclude or discriminate against ‘aqim, the barren in the verse. "The mention of ‘aqim in 42:50 is not only understood as infertility, but also refers to the choice not to have children." Neither the Qur’an nor Muhammadﷺ imply that procreation is the only purpose of sex.

5. **Therefore both people in marriage have the rights to come to their own ways of living and be respected for it by others, including the decision to be consensually childless.** "All agreements must also be based on the principle of mutual understanding, reciprocity, through the path of mu’asyarah bil ma’ruf or a relationship that is full of tolerance and justice." The booklet also extends this call for appreciation and respect to include those who choose not to get married, or to have children in ways that differ from the norm, including assisted reproduction and the norm.

6. **Various provisions of religious law for these cases must not be considered in a vacuum, but instead on the reflection of contextual social reality according to the present time and up-to-date science.** If the development of science has been able to provide an opportunity for someone to reproduce or not to reproduce according to their abilities and desires, then religion must be able to accommodate this development as an embodiment of the fulfilment of people’s physical and spiritual happiness or ‘sa’adatuddarain.’

When confronted with this growth-oriented worldview, the burden is often placed on sexually diverse Muslims to change ourselves to conform to it. Yet we know: Not all the free will on earth can overpower Allah’s design for who we are. And more of something doesn’t automatically make it good. So instead, what if everyone was inspired by the reality of sexually diverse Muslims to reflect on whether a ‘reproductive regime’ really fulfils our Divine collective purpose as an ummah?

Muhammadﷺ envisioned a world where orphans were adopted and loved by responsible adults. When reflecting on this in our time, one can imagine layers of benefits for adjusting our collective norms —

- What if heterosexual marriage wasn’t one’s only option for a stable life?
- What if every child born was a child that was deeply wanted and prepared for by parents and policymakers?
- What if orphans were adopted and safe even if they were ‘already’ teenagers?
- What if older generations were guaranteed care without the pressure to raise their own caretakers? Solo elderly adults would no longer be one of our most vulnerable members of society.

“The proliferation-oriented view of a religion gave birth to the heterosexual cisgender masculine patriarchal reproductive regime that until today has continued to be accepted and praised. This reality has become one of the reasons why Islam is homophobic, transphobic, and anti-LGBTI.”
regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

- Can we reimagine more varied ideas of family beyond the romantic heterosexual pair? This could include state recognition of platonic long-term female friendships, for example.

- How else can our social acceptance as ‘natural’ Muslims be measured instead of our marital or parental status?

The Qur’an also calls us to do a lot more together than have children in service of a proliferation-based worldview. Since we believe its words to be timeless, how can we bring those other priorities into focus today to not just broaden the straight path, but include as many of us on it?

Lessons for Everyone Else

“The problem is not straight vs. queer necessarily, it’s perceived superiority that leads to us not wanting to learn. Straights feel superior to queers. Men feel superior to women. Gay men feel superior to trans people. White people feel superior to brown people. There are many Qur’anic verses where God tells us to learn from nature and other communities. To learn something instead of discriminating against them is something the Qur’an wants us to do with anyone regardless of social status, gender, or sexuality. Because later when we meet God again, we will be entirely alone with our choices. ‘Furada kama khalqanakum awwala marrah’ in Surah al-An’am 94 implies that we will be our most primordial self, alone as we were first created. We don’t take our race, class, gender, or sexual identity with us. What will be left?” (raqi spiritual healer, Malaysia, he/him)

“When I encountered the term ‘embodied tafsir’ in the works of Sa’diyya Shaikh from South Africa, I was so excited. The way tafsir conventionally is so male-dominated and intellectually-focused overlooks the embodied practices that queer Muslims struggle with in their daily lives. I think the concept is important to understand not only the experiences of Muslim women but all diverse Muslims. How we are struggling with our daily lives is also related to how we want to connect with God. That’s what other Muslims could learn from us, I think, to look deep into their embodied experiences. I know I learn from the way trans people connect their body to their mind and soul. This very localised embodied experience is so important for Muslims to learn about how to connect to God. Queer Muslims battle with this every day, but in this is also our journey to reconsider what we know and heal. I aligned with the concept of embodied tafsir immediately. In my queer camp, I already see this embodied experience way of thinking through Catholic ethics, and it’s exciting to see it developing with diverse Muslims like us.” (freelance researcher, Indonesia, she/her)

“I am staunchly anti-natalist, which means that while I view procreation as inherently unethical due to the sheer prospect of bringing a new life into a world where they will almost certainly suffer, I may adopt a child — especially an orphan — if and when I reach the level of financial security required to raise a child comfortably.” (27, Malaysia, she/her)

“I think God puts queer people like us on Earth as examples and for people to learn from us. Some of us might not be the best of role models. Some are. All of us are different in our queerness and no one experience is the same. I don’t think God puts us through this for the fun of it. I think God is kind. Faith is deeply personal. People can learn different versions of ways we can be Muslim from queer Muslims. No one can judge us except for God. So keep the faith and hopefully it brings us to...
“God’s acceptance and understanding is greater than discrimination. I want to say that God accepts anyone of any sexuality or gender identity and does not discriminate the way humans do. I get that some people do not believe in any other Muslim other than cis and hetero ones. What’s not okay is discrimination and being disregard.” (24, social worker, he/him)

“I have a hard time articulating it in detail, but I believe us queers are much closer to God than those who persecute us. If there is real sainthood, isn’t it in being able to keep our heart pure, to be kind and generous despite the stigma we endure?” (bisexual, France, she/her)

“We are living statements to the fact that Allah has the most creative energy across the universe. He did not create the universe in the form of binaries, but in multiplication and merging realities, all of which beg for forgiveness because there is no single way of being.” (academic, Pakistan, he/him)

“Learn about how benevolent, merciful, and loving Allah is. We’ve gone through so much. LGBTQ Muslims risk their lives in their truth and continue to do so. People might wonder why couldn’t we stay in a closet or pick another identity to exist under. The ones who have the privilege and safety to be open about their identity do so because they believe strongly in a better future — for the LGBTQ Muslims who could not do what they do, and for future generations of us. Despite what we hear from family, from fellow Muslims, from non-Muslims, from the LGBTQ community, we continue to exist and love ourselves. That’s resilience. I hope there is a day where we have validation and respect. Until then, we continue.” (bisexual/pansexual, USA, she/her)

EXERCISE 11

Collective Discussion:

Understanding the Divine through us:

1) Agree on a list of ‘stakeholders’ that affects everyone in the room. A few examples can be friends, family, activists, scholars, organisations, or religious authorities.

2) Assign a different audience to each group or pair. Discuss what you want them to understand about sexually diverse Muslims. How does it tie into a richer understanding of God or Islam for all? If time permits, address them in a collective letter to read out to the room.

3) Compare each group’s answers or letters and discuss.

Personal:

What can you learn about God from witnessing queer Muslim lived realities — from these sharings, friends, or beyond?

Allow yourself to see your life as a manifested source of rich Divine understanding for others. Meditate briefly if you need to before journaling your answers.
Imagine: The Futures We Dream Of

COMMUNITY AND A GARDEN

“I would love to live on collective land. Hopefully with very queer people! The land wouldn’t be in an urban space, it’s somewhere rural. Everyone has different skills: gardening, marketing, distribution, ploughing the irrigation. Some of us are speaking to visitors at our market. From the land, we grow and harvest food, and only eat what is enough. We share what is left. We hold discussions, and maintain some kind of co-op. Near the land is my house, it’s made out of reusable materials. I’m one of the farmers and fundraisers. Near the land and house is a public space where people are doing qi gong. There are craft workshops, people are working with their hands and bodies. There are fruit and drinks nearby. I imagine I’m watching the scene, with an orange cat and a small purple dog, the kind of dog with eyes that are hard to see. I want to live for a hundred years, so I might be old by then!” (queer woman, Indonesia, she/her)

“A home like Heaven on Earth! There’s a large garden with a little greenhouse for growing vegetables and flowers, from which my little family and I harvest food and medicine to feed ourselves and our communities. There’s a pool because I need a body of water nearby! If there are kids, we create routines and rituals to encourage them to get involved with nature and whatever sparks their interest. My work remains multidisciplinary and multi-dimensional. When I leave this world for good, my work continues to catalyze beautiful, joyful and transformative experiences far and wide.” (genderfluid femme, Malaysia, she/they)

A WELCOMING SPACE FOR PRAYER AND LEARNING

“They wear all kinds of things, and we are sitting and talking about poetry, literature, and we’re going through the Quran and talking about God. And there’s this openness. I just want this idea of openness and I’m giving back. Spaciously. Young adults who want that space can come over and we can be together.” (38, Malaysia, she/her)

“I have a landed property with a garden. I live with my partner and our non-binary child. I have an amazing group of feminist friends and allies. I’ve always imagined myself as a Mama figure, to be honest! Even before I met my partner, I envisioned myself with a house that’s always open to anyone who needs help or shelter. I’ll be there like, ‘What can Mama do for you today?’ So I’m cooking for everyone, and there’s this space for holding art, poetry, workshops, and forums for theatre, and it’ll be a communal space in the house that’s adjacent to my own private space. We’d have a nice garden because my girlfriend is a wood scientist. Our child is leading the art workshop, they’re probably around 20ish at this time. There are like, 7 people with them at the workshop. I’m looking in from the garden and I’m so proud.” (31, lesbian, she/her)
**A LOVING FAMILY**

“I get to see the sun out of my window, trees, instead of seeing another block of apartments. I would sit on a rocking chair and enjoy the wind, something I only learned to do at 25. My partner and I have an adopted son running around. My partner is spoiling him, throwing him in the air. The wind is in my hair and I am thinking this kid is going to grow up to be a demon, I know it and I can see it coming. But my partner is going to love it. The kid is going to make a mess in the house, I’m stressed out, and he’ll join in, I’m stuck with two children basically. But I would love it.” (25, Singapore, he/him)

“I have cats and dogs, I love them as they love me, my wife is next to me. We’re married! My family is all around. The house is open. I’m still teaching, but in this future all my identities are merged together, and I can just be. I’m going to be old! But happy, playful. I’m obviously wearing a whole flower wreath on my head. No makeup, and I’m glowing. Long white hair. A flowy outfit that’s fuchsia and black, with my shoulders showing. And I’m on the floor sitting, hanging out, everyone’s drinking tea. There’s a lot of plants in this house. I would like that. You’re making me very happy thinking about this!” (38, Singapore, he/him)

“I will be fully present, joyful and unabashed at secular, posh English dinner parties when I say Bismillah before drinking a glass of red wine and going off to say my Isha’ prayers before dessert is served. I will go to the mosque and be able to make the sign of the cross and reply to the azan by singing a Gospel canticle. And all the while, my husband will be beside me, holding my hand, and everyone will look upon us with delight and we will return their gaze with even more reverence and delight. I will be able to go back to Malaysia and explain to the many friends and family members I have that I am very spiritual, and that for people like me, one religion is never enough.” (25, Singapore, he/him)

**SUPPORTIVE SOCIETAL STRUCTURES**

“We have acceptance in the form of institutions. Work, marriage, family, education, fully validates and accepts gender diversity and sexuality. Marriage is legal. Sexual diversity is taught in schools. Workplace equality, full health rights. I don’t think these are over the top or a special privilege for queer people, it’s just life in our full humanity.” (45, housewife, she/her)

“Our society has moved past our fundamental insecurities to accept our differences. Inequality is considered dangerous and unacceptable. We pay attention to everyone’s rights. I will have the basic things afforded for people to live, it’s available to everyone. We have set aside all our differences and work together so that people don’t die of poverty. Maybe we won’t have gay marriage yet, or inclusive sex education in schools. But we have the head-space to work towards change, because we’re not worried about whether we will be safe tomorrow.” (lesbian, Malaysia, she/her)

“We have to stay conscious of who is around us so nobody gets left behind, so that the state of who we are is not in a complacency where we forget others. So in the future of my dreams, nobody gets left behind. But I’d also love to be married to my partner.” (34, Islamic studies and gender PhD student, he/him)

**EXERCISE 12**

Meditate and imagine: After some time, all your obstacles are over. What does the future of your dreams look like? Take a few minutes to meditate in silence. With each exhale, add or clarify a detail in your mind about the future of your dreams. You can move from broad to specific, or specific to broad. If you encounter an obstacle such as shame or judgement, give yourself permission to remove it in your next breath and continue sharpening your scene.

**Personal:**

Now write down or illustrate the future of your dreams just for yourself. Be as descriptive and indulgent as you can.

Remember: this is an imagination exercise, so anything is possible, and no one but God will know what you want to manifest! Set a reminder in your phone for when you would like to reopen and update it again.

**Collective Discussion:**

Once the meditation is over, discuss your experience and vision in groups. How did this exercise make you feel? Listen and share with the room.

If time permits: Make an artwork of your vision, or create a collective image with as many details as possible. Present your image to the room.
MORE FUTURE VISIONS

“I have a community that can accept all parts of me. I can go to the mosque with my family and pray with my kids and I don’t have to hide my partner. I will never be seen as exceptional, and patriarchy and white supremacy are torn down. On a personal level, I will live near the ocean with many friends and other loved ones.” (41, Canada, she/her)

“I see an inclusive queer mosque, with a library and social support center for queer Muslims, for all queer people. There are dialogues for interfaith harmony, and there are more women-only or women-led mosques.” (35, Pakistan, they/them)

“I want to be a teacher or a mentor. I want to teach kids what they should be taught in school, I want to be someone who gives them hope to never stop trying. In this future no one is ever subjected to feel as lonely as I have felt growing up. Everyone has someone they can look up to.” (20, Pakistan, she/her)

“I finally have material security. I am a college professor writing research papers, with a beautiful home decorated like an Instagram account. I have a romantic partner with whom I travel with and share all the beauty I worked for. Our place will be big enough to have guests, maybe it’s a countryside house. I would use it to shelter queer asylum seekers.” (38, France, she/her)

“I would have activities with other queer Muslims, have more access to broader community, and participate in collective collaborations with other Muslim activists.” (31, Kyrgyzstan, she/her)

“I want to be a teacher or a mentor. I want to teach kids what they should be taught in school, I want to be someone who gives them hope to never stop trying. In this future no one is ever subjected to feel as lonely as I have felt growing up. Everyone has someone they can look up to.” (20, Pakistan, she/her)

“I’d like to be powerful enough to help other queer people around me in a more meaningful way. I’d like to be able to say “Come to me for help, and I’ll see what I can do” and really help them. I won’t be in the spotlight. I’ll be married to the woman I love, and have 1-2 kids, we bring them back home to my mother every other week for them to all play together. On a typical morning, my partner is rushing for work with toast in her mouth, and I am starting my day by prepping for meetings at my home office. That’s it, that’s enough for me.” (bisexual, Malaysia, she/her)

“I’m known as a queer Muslim artist, making works that educate others on sexuality. My art empowers swing voters to realise the power of their choices.” (27, Indonesia, she/her)

“I’m a social worker with a masters degree, financially independent and living by myself even if I have a partner. I’ve mastered pole dancing and belly dancing. My core is unstoppable. I’m fluent in 3 languages and my tajweed is on point. I’ve found a group of cool halal baddies to go on hajj with and we protect each other while we’re there. I am active in my community of LGBTQ Muslims, desis, Armenians, and allies. I don’t make art for money, so I write and draw and perform. I visit my parents. I visit their home countries, and I meet my dadi, my namesake. In every country I travel to I pray in at least one masjid. I’m loved, accepted, uplifted, validated, and my family is chosen and deliberate.” (18, USA, she/her)

“I am in a tiny self-sustainable off-the-grid home on a hill. I live there with my wife — I don’t know who she will be, but she is someone I have a connection with that I haven’t had with anyone other than my father. We are happy.” (cis woman, India, she/her)

“I have a farmhouse of my own. I have a loving husband and partner, good children, normal relationships with my family and am true to myself.” (gay, Qatar, he/him)

“I am volunteering in a remote village, building technology, doing research, writing books, doing activism for a more inclusive society. I am in a live in relationship with somebody that I love and my family understands my goals in life.” (27, Pakistan, she/her)

“I’m legally married to my partner in Malaysia while she remains a Catholic and we both have a good relationship with our respective families. We now live together here or wherever her job takes her. My partner joins me every year for Raya celebrations at my parents and she enjoys my siblings’ company during these visits. My nieces and nephew know that they can be whoever they want to be without fearing religious and societal backlash.” (29, bisexual, she/her)

“In terms of sexuality, I’d want billboards across two states where it’ll say, “I love girls!” so that all those years spent being in the closet will be paid back in months. My family will accept me for who I am and I can bring my future girlfriend to meet them. Queer Muslims do not worry about being their full selves at talks and forums, and I can attend them very happily.” (27, Malaysia, she/her)

“InshaAllah I will have a partner, be steadfast in my iman, and be a registered psychologist working with the queer community and refugees, especially Muslims.” (Gay transc man, Australia, he/him)

“I live openly with my partner wherever we want. We feel the warmth of Allah’s blessings and mercy always. Our families treat us with warmth, kindness, and acceptance.” (queer, Egypt, she/her)

“We wouldn’t get caught in the
complexities of language and tone. We wouldn’t be misunderstood. People are not left hungry and angry on the streets. The middle class is not guilted into silence. Leaders of the states are not political pawns, they care passionately about the people. The world is harmonious, just, and free.” (28, Bangladesh, he/him)

“I will be a university professor after I complete my PhD. I finally have a loving partner, whose presence in my life is acknowledged by my family as well. After I die, I want to reunite with my late father. I often have this dream where he comes back and I hug him, and it feels so painful when I wake up. So when we meet again, I want to ride our car with him, and have ice cream in the front seat like I did when I was a child. That life would be better than the one in which all my other dreams come true.” (Trans man, Pakistan, he/him)

Gratitude: What Are We Grateful for Now?

Long before contemporary articulations of a gratitude practice and its scientific benefits, the Qur’an has asked us to reflect on Divine blessings in our struggles and say Alhamdulillah.

Most of us were raised homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, and ableist — that which we had to unlearn and purify ourselves from. This also means realising that in some ways, we are what we were told to hate.

Embodying our truth requires queer courage, but also gratitude. Islam asks us to strive for justice, but to also be thankful for as much as we can for what we have and how far we’ve come — even as we’re told to not expect gratitude for the good we do (76:8-9). Gratitude to the Divine is an opposite of unbelief, and saves us from believing that we are self-sufficient (96:6-7). However, many of us are ungrateful (100:6).

As we build our courage, practicing humility and the ability to count even one blessing from the Source is already a fine way to live. As Allah says in the Qur’an: Remember Me; I will remember you. Be thankful to Me, and never ungrateful (2:152).

We end this workbook with the consideration that reframing the journeys of our life and earth as experiences of gratitude can be healing, humbling, and empowering for many sexually diverse Muslims.
Note: Although many queer Muslims are grateful for their loved ones and any sense of safety in their lives, answering “my parents/friends” will not always convey to others what about them earned your gratitude. When sharing, try to be as specific as you can about their actions, choices, or conversations that you were grateful for. By being specific, you help your listener(s) understand more about your needs and even learn better allyship. To model this, we end with what some of the people we spoke to are grateful for.

**EXERCISE 13**

**Personal:**

- Make your own map.
- What would your own gratitude constellation map look like?
- Be as creative as you like.

**Collective Discussion:**

- What are you grateful for right now?
- Take a few minutes to reflect on this question and make notes.
- Share your answer in pairs or small groups with deep listening.
- Alternatively, write your answers on separate cards and pin them on a wall. For multi-day events, consider a designated wall for people to share gratitudes throughout the gathering.

I'm grateful for...

- cats
- Rumi
- Mitski
- my books
- my creative outlets
- my pets
- money
- Monday
- Monday nightTaipei
- Meditation
- my partner
- my family
- community
- friends
- health
- income
- safety
- love
- donations
- green tea
- brown rice
- spring
- birdsong
- That my students want to know me
- Steve
- Universe
- BERNHOLTZ'S CITY LIGHTS ALBUM
- meeting other queer Muslims
- living alone
- Istanbul
- Internet access
- Killing Eve
- my students
- love
“I’m grateful my family gives me space to be who I am.
They disagree with some of my queer Muslim interpretations, but at least they won’t kick me out of my home. I have space to be who I am here, so I’m grateful for that. I can practice my faith without feeling disconnected like I did in high school. I’m grateful for my beard! And that people have told me I am handsome.” (trans man, Indonesia, he/him)

“I am grateful for myself.
I tend to search for things from outside of myself, and so neglected, suppressed, or denied my own feelings. I’m grateful I allowed myself to invest time in being aware of my own feelings. From this awareness of my own moments, I can understand things more clearly than before. So I am grateful for time too.” (33, cis woman, she/her)

“I’m grateful for my partner for being so supportive although she’s so different from me.
She’s so into science and I’m into the arts. Yet we communicate well because of our similar values. Even though she doesn’t identify as a practicing Muslim, she supports my spirituality in a way that is very affirming. She’s genuine about it.” (lesbian, Malaysia, she/her)

“I’m grateful I still have a job and can help others beyond my parents and family, that the ones who live with me under the same roof still have enough to eat. It’s unfair that those basic things are a struggle for others.” (39, lesbian, she/her)

“I am grateful that this is such a great time to be queer and Muslim.
It is so different compared to my youth, where the word LGBT did not even exist yet around me. Instead of being depressed that we are unheard, remember that this is a young era for queer Muslims. Be an activist, go out and educate, be brave, have dialogues. I’m grateful that God gave me the capacity to create a support group. I am grateful in my age that I have opportunities to be with our queer people, to learn for myself and others.” (55, Singapore, she/her)

Letters: qmcourage@gmail.com
With queer courage comes love, peace, and joy.