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# Teaching from the Tent: Muslim Women's Leadership in Digital Religion

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**Teaching from the Tent: Muslim Women's Leadership in Digital Religion**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF  
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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Tamara Gray

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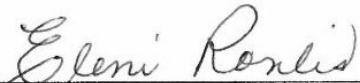
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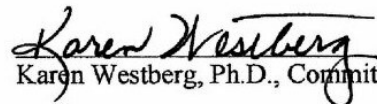
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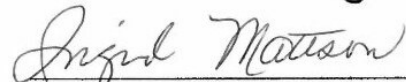
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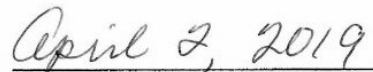
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Finally, I am grateful to the women teacher-leaders who graciously loaned me their time, their stories, and their leadership lives so that I could explore what it meant to be a Muslim woman religious leader in digital religion. They not only helped me think through leadership issues, they helped me realize my life’s work.

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mentor, teacher, and beloved guide: Anse Sameera Zayed (1944-2019).

### **Abstract**

Muslim women's accounts of their own religious leadership have been consistently absent from historical documents and present-day reporting. The absence of narrations does not necessarily indicate the absence of women, however, and today more and more women are leading and becoming public figures using new platforms provided by the Internet. In order to understand the essence of their leadership, this study sought to discover and describe the religious leadership lives of Muslim women, to disentangle the relationship between feminism and feminist work per Muslim women religious leaders, and to understand how digital religion influences their leadership. This qualitative study is a feminist phenomenology of seven Muslim women who are public figures and religious leaders. Using long interviews, document analysis of their publications, public teaching observations, and netnographies. I gathered data about the essence of their leadership. I further triangulated the data with a six-week study of a WhatsApp chat that happened between 75 Muslim women religious leaders who remain anonymous in this study. The feminist theories of bell hooks (2000), Nell Noddings (1985), and feminist theologians, along with Aristotle's theory of knowledge as expressed by al Farābi, and Chaos theory as applied to social systems as described by Fritjof Capra (2002) came together to form the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Careful analysis of the data resulted in a model of Muslim women's religious leadership that can be used to both appreciate the unique aspects of their leadership and improve education and training for Muslim women who wish to enter into the field.

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## Teaching from the Tent: Muslim Women Leaders in Digital Religion

**CHAPTER ONE****Introduction to the Research**

In the last century much of religious leadership in Muslim spaces has played out at conferences with all male panels, seminary style universities with mostly male professors, and in mosques with male imams and all male boards. Historically, and especially during the foundational period (Nadwi, 2007), women were part of the upper echelons of thinkers, teachers, and narrators of Islamic texts. As such they were an important part of foundational theology and law, and the transmission and teaching of religion, though most of these women were not well known, and their contributions often less so. Furthermore, since the advent of the Internet; email lists in the nineties, social media in the early twentieth century, the popularity of YouTube and other apps of outreach in the last ten to fifteen years, Muslim women have been involved (Bunt, 2018, Bunt, 2003, Bunt, 2000, Piela, 2012 ). Muslim women have been taking advantage of the egalitarian nature of the internet and growing into global religious leaders, changing the lives, attitudes, and expectations of Muslims around the world.

A historical anonymity, however, seems to have crept into the twenty-first century. This, coupled with shallow stories about Muslim women, assumptions, and voices speaking in their stead, has moved the narrative from anonymity to fiction – silencing Muslim women leaders before they were able to tell their stories. The lived realities and lived histories of contemporary Muslim women religious leaders are either absent or misconstrued. Estelle Freedman (2007) maintained that spiritual authority had historically been a common way of fighting patriarchy (Freedman, 2007), and since the fundamental purpose of feminist thinking was to reject the legitimacy of patriarchal rule – the very presence of women in the field of religious leadership

was a feminist action. Feminism, however, also initiated social movements to alter laws and customs (Freedman, 2007), but the Muslim women in my study and others like them positioned themselves as *traditional* scholars, so were they acting in a feminist way? What was the essence of their leadership?

### **Feminism and Faith**

The western battle for women's rights began in the late nineteenth century and from the very beginning religion was involved (Morgan & deVries, 2010). The Declaration of Sentiments (1848) in the United States declared, "He allows her in church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church" (Declaration of Sentiments, 1848, para 16). In Australia, the most prominent suffragettes were often theologians and preachers including Catherine Helen Spence and Vida Goldstein (McPhillips, 2016). The relationship between Christianity and feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was so tightly woven that the very terminology and culture of feminism was representative of Christianity (deVries, 2010).

As feminism fought the patriarchy of the state, it began to face the patriarchies of religion. Daly (1985), Catholic feminist theologian, took on the stained-glass ceiling for women in her book *The Church and the Second Sex*, anchoring the barrier of women in religious leadership in the Hebrew anthropomorphizing of God as Father and therefore male (Daly, 1985). Because God, in Christian theology, was male, men were more qualified to lead the church. Challenging this rhetoric did not open doors in the Catholic church for women to enter the priesthood, but Protestant denominations did make changes. In fact, mainline Protestants had been cracking doors open for women since the nineteenth century. Baptists ordained their first



woman in 1815, the Congregationalist Church ordained Antoinette Blackwell in 1853, the Presbyterian Church ordained its first minister in 1956 (Hunt, 2004), and in 1972 Priesand became the first female rabbi to be ordained in Reformed Judaism (Zucker, 1987). Many other denominations followed suit, and today it is not uncommon to find women holding ordained positions in mainline Protestant Christian and non-Orthodox Jewish settings (McPhillips, 2016).

Muslim women were not immune to misogynist interpretations of faith, but such oppression, often complicated by colonialism and post-colonial dictatorships produced a different response. In the early years of the western women's movement, Muslim women activists, were often busy dealing with the ramifications of colonialism (al-Ghazali, 1994; Badran, 2009). When they looked to their faith for guidance, or to find a place of power and leadership, they were faced with a dichotomy of literature that romanticized women and post-colonial cultures that suppressed them (Badran, 2009). Since Islam does not have a formalized clergy, there were no strictly theological barriers to leadership. But without an ordination process, the question of authority and legitimacy, and who 'counted' as a religious leader remained vague. Unlike their sisters in other Abrahamic faiths, Muslim women did not have a formalized body of clergy to rail against for systemic patriarchy or to turn to for legitimacy.

Views of an anthropomorphic male god were not generalizable to Islam and thus did not explain the lack of women in religious leadership amongst Muslims. Islamic theology is strongly anti-anthropomorphic and denies all connections to such human qualities as gender, eschewing the very idea that God would ever become human (Quran, 112: 3-5, 13:16, 6:76-79, 2:255, 4:171). Muslim women shared some of the social and cultural struggles with their sisters in religious leadership. Theologically they faced objections to leadership based in interpretations of hadith and misogynistic attitudes in culture. But with the fluid nature of religious leadership,

Muslim women have had their own unique history and challenges different than those of their Christian and Jewish sisters.

The social networking of the internet has created a complex system wherein women of all faiths, and in this case Muslim women, could stand up and lead with fewer of the barriers that they faced in physical societies and communities (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). Platforms became neighborhoods, and religious teachers became overnight influencers with thousands and even millions of ‘followers.’ The speed of the internet and the changes it brought about had a powerful effect on women’s leadership (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). It opened doors and gave women increased participation and voice, shaped perceptions of leadership in new ways, and refined what was meant by power and influence (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). Here then was a space of leadership, a new type of social structure, a place where the mosque was no longer the only place where voices of authority were heard, a place that challenged patriarchal structures without stress or strain, a space where Muslim women could lead.

### **The Power of Religious Leadership in Muslim Cultures**

Religious leaders in Muslim countries and cultures carry much weight, influence, and power. “The Muslim 500: The World’s 500 Most Influential Muslims” is a yearly report published by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Amman Jordan. The report is not interested in the level of religiosity of the men and women it reports as influential, but rather the level of influence of men and women who self-identify as Muslim. The report assesses the level of influence of Muslim men and women in a variety of arenas. In 2017 the first 50 – the most influential - included 27 religious leaders (26 men and one woman) and 23 political leaders (22 men and one woman). More than half of the very most influential Muslim leaders in the world were religious leaders in 2017 (Schleifer, 2017). At number 26 was Her Eminence Sheikha

Munīra Qubaysi, and at number 32 was Her Majesty Queen Rania al-Abdullah of Jordan. This single fact stands alone to emphasize the power and transformative possibilities in religious leadership in Muslim communities – the *sheikha* [female religious leader] was more influential than the queen.

In 2019 little had changed, except to continue to underline the importance of religious leadership in Muslim societies. The first 50 included 30 religious leaders, 18 political leaders, one calligrapher, and one footballer. There were three women: the president of Singapore, the sixteen-year-old political activist Ahd Tamimi, and Sheikha Munira Qubaysi. In 2019 the sheikha had risen to number 27 and the female political leader was at number 41. Ahd Tamimi, who was named a person of the year by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, was number 48. Again, the sheikha was more influential than the political leader and the activist. Religious leadership was of central influence in Muslim societies.

### **Significance: A Search for Women**

The collection and organization into systematic subjects of Islamic law and theology relied on the scholarly transmission of sacred text first and the analysis of that text second. In order to verify the legitimacy and reliability of the major players in this *sanad*, or chain of narration, a biographical science grew in the seventh century (first century *hijri* [Muslim calendar]). The science was called “Study of the Men<sup>1</sup>” or ‘*Ilm al-Rijāl*’ and grew to be a vast biographical dictionary that included details of the transmitter’s life, including but not limited to his geographic location, ethnicity, mental capacity, theological and legal affiliation, and moral character. Women were not completely ignored in these pages. Noted for their work in the transmission of sacred text, they were mentioned alongside the men.

---

<sup>1</sup> The word *rijāl* literally translated here as ‘men’ often refers more generally to ‘people’.

Having noted women's names in *asnād* (chains of transmission), and curious about the biographical data of these women, Dr. Akram Nadwi (2007) embarked on a search for these lost women scholars. His original intention was to write a pamphlet, but by the beginning of the twenty first century he had compiled a forty-volume unpublished work of over 12,000 women religious scholars of the past fourteen centuries. The accounts were brief and at times sketchy, but his contribution to the field was unprecedented.

In an interview with Dr. Nadwi in January 2017, he spoke of the difficulty involved in uncovering Muslim women's stories. He linked the difficulty to a global and historical tendency to ignore women's contributions (not only amongst Muslims, but in general), and a Muslim tendency to refrain from exposing the secrets of women, to 'cover them' and their stories out of piety (personal communication, January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

Early scholars such as Imam Nawawi (d. 1277) and Hāfiẓ Ibn al-Najjar are recorded to have had women teachers in the hundreds, but to discover their names much less their stories has proven nearly impossible (Nadwi, 2007). Nadwi (2007) mentioned his own difficulty in finding the names and biographical narratives of Ibn al-Najjar's women teachers and he cited Al-Qurashi (d. 775) as writing in his book of women Hanafi<sup>2</sup> (a school of thought) scholars that "I have very little information [about the women scholars] and there is no doubt that the state of women is based on covering (*sitr*)" (Nadwi, 2007, p. xxi). And so, the blame for lack of information is passed off as a cultural moral code, and a separation of public and private spheres. Nadwi (2007) contended that women were often considered part of private life as opposed to public and therefore their stories were lesser known.

---

<sup>2</sup> There are four major schools of Sunni thought: Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali. The Hanafi school is sometimes called the "school of opinion and analysis" and is popular in the Indian subcontinent, Turkey, and parts of Egypt and the Levant.

## **Significance**

The significance of a study of leading Muslim women teacher-leaders is no less than a historical paradigm shift. Just reporting alone - on their lives, their work, their thoughts, their experiences - will record the efforts of women for posterity and begin to move the 'Study of the Men' into the 'Study of the Men and the Women.' Such a shift at the front of history can affect how we seek historical documentation of founders.

## **Reflexive Statement**

I am newly an insider in this research. As an Islamic scholar, a religious leader in the Muslim community, an author, a translator, a non-profit leader, and a digital immigrant (born before the widespread use of digital media), I am deeply entwined in the community of Muslim leadership. However, just seven years ago I was completely offline (except for email), living a quiet life of study and teaching in Damascus, Syria while raising my family and working in schools.

## **How I Became a Religious Leader**

In August 2012, I visited Zaytuna College, a new yet-to-be-accredited Muslim college in California. The marketing team asked me if I would do an interview. I had just moved back to the United States after twenty years in Damascus, Syria where, while working in education, I studied and became a qualified Islamic scholar. My studies included formal classes in theology, *fiqh* (religious rulings about the practical application of law to worship and life), history, *sira* (the life and context of the Prophet of Islam), Hadith studies, Quran studies in *tajwid* (pronunciation and recitation), *tafsīr* (exegesis) and memorization, and *usūl* (foundations of knowledge) classes for Hadith, Quran and *fiqh*. I was also trained in rigorous spiritual exercise, self-discipline, character, and other qualities of a spiritual path. I studied classical Arabic, grammar, and

practiced the colloquial Arabic language. I had done my best to keep up with English language readings in education, modern philosophy and literature, but I was completely ignorant of the ways of social media.

The Zaytuna staff had been very gracious to me, so even though I was in a hurry, I agreed to the interview. I sat on a bench under the sunny California sky and waited to be interviewed. Suddenly, a man with a mammoth-sized camera came around the corner, and my jaw dropped as I realized that he meant an interview on video. I was not on social media, had never been filmed doing anything, and had just arrived from a dictatorship country that kept a tight grip on public activity. I was also wondering what my spiritual mentors would think of a woman on camera. But I had agreed to an interview, so I sat up straight and tried frantically to think of something to say.

I left, flew to another city, slept and woke up the next morning to a viral video. Zaytuna had offered a free t-shirt to those who shared the video and it had garnered thousands of views. Suddenly people were googling me and wondering “Who is she?” and “Why does Zaytuna care what she thinks?” One person wrote in the comments, “I can’t find her on Google so how could she be anyone?”

This was the beginning of my initiation into Muslim religious leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Between two lives.** I leaned against the cold window of the airplane as my travel companion leaned against me. I was both freezing and overheated, split by a binary of temperatures. It was the red-eye flight from New Jersey to San Francisco, and I was in the middle of a speaking tour that stood as a bridge between two lives - both of them mine.

***The first life.*** Damascus, Syria was a place of jasmine, cardamom coffee, and roses. I lived in a flat across the street from a French-style bakery that served custard éclairs, walnut

tarts, and flaky napoleons. My children took yogurt sandwiches to school and drank sweet tea in the evenings. Weekends were spent visiting family, traveling to the countryside, and studying. I worked in schools as teacher, curriculum coordinator, and academic director. I published three culturally appropriate English Language curriculum programs and worked as a consultant for companies that flew me to Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE on a regular basis. During my twenty years in Damascus I was also first a student and then a teacher of Islamic sciences. I studied a full curriculum of Islamic and Quranic studies in the traditional *ijaza* [teaching certification] system giving me an honorific of sheikha, *anse*, or *ustadha* and qualifying me as a Muslim scholar, preacher, and teacher of the faithful.

War came to Syria under the disguise of hope. The Arab spring captured the imaginations of the youth; they protested, the government responded, foreign powers meddled, and civil war erupted. My son and husband were in Jordan when that border closed, so I lived alone during most of the school year 2011 and 2012. The summer of 2012 I left Syria for a summer trip ‘away.’ I had never planned such a long vacation, but the political situation was getting worse, and we decided a few months out of the country would be best.

***The end of the first life.*** I started my summer in the United Kingdom, where I met my husband at Heathrow. He greeted me with his decision not to return to the Middle East. He was job hunting. I went next to Minnesota and my family. My sister had a baby on July 6<sup>th</sup>, and one week later the war entered Damascus, finally convincing me that our family could no longer live there.

I was 46 years old, jobless, homeless, and dreamless. I did not know what life looked like anymore.

Part of the plan of that fateful summer had been a speaking tour across the United States. Some of my students (those who had come to Syria seeking their own ijazas) had determined that I should travel and speak, and so had made elaborate plans. And this was how I found myself on the red-eye flight to San Francisco with my head and heart split between two lives.

During my tour across the United States I met hundreds of Muslim women. My presentations were grounded in traditional faith structures but were feminist in attitude and nontraditional in pedagogy. My audiences were taken aback, struggled to pinpoint where I fit on the (mostly male) map of traditional scholarship, and intrigued. The women I met were intelligent, empowered in their places of work, and highly educated in secular studies. Yet something was wrong. The Muslim master narrative of the twentieth century had taken legitimacy away from women leaders. A binary discourse had been created about women – on one side the traditionalists and the modernist-literalists (who called themselves the more traditional traditionalists) who either spoke of women in terms of reverence, motherhood, and unrealistic graces or left women out of the equation all together. On the other side were the progressives and feminists who railed against Muslim male leadership, worked as outsiders ostracizing many women, and ignored traditional Islamic scholarship. Both worked to promote their particular ideal of womanhood and neither focused on the average American Muslim woman in her faith tradition and community. Muslim societies faced a crisis of narrative and having finally returned to St. Paul, Minnesota after 69 classes, lectures, and workshops, ten planes, long miles in a car, and a blur of cities - I had a decision to make.

*The decision.* Should I take my scholarly training and throw myself into the complicated and nuanced feminist struggle to change attitudes, practices, and culture in Muslim communities? I knew I would face resistance from both traditional male scholars and progressive



feminist leaders. I realized it could get ugly and lonely. But the traditional male scholars had created a system where women were essentially left out of the spiritual pie – between mosques that blocked women from the main prayer space and misogynist statements about the role of women in society – and intelligent, educated and economically empowered Muslim women found themselves disempowered by their faith. On the other hand, the progressive feminist Muslims had left out enough basic tradition as to delegitimize their work for the majority of Muslims, denying basic faith tenets that had been in place for over a thousand years. Added to the mix was the effect of modernism and fundamentalism on the Muslim community, which had succeeded in cutting off the community from traditional spiritual practices that had been long nourishing and supportive. I stood at this cusp and asked myself, “Should I do it?”

Bell hooks famously said, “There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few,” (hooks, 2015, p. 113). Because of my unique educational background, my sense of obligation and duty overrode my desire for a quiet life. So, I made the decision to lead. To take the criticism and the compliments – both precarious for a person on a path of spiritual consciousness -and build a movement. I created my first public Facebook page.

**The second life.** I decided to lead in September 2012. Since then I founded a nonprofit organization; Rabata Inc. Our mission was to promote positive cultural change through creative educational experiences. We provided educational programming, spirituality projects, and community engagement efforts in order to fulfill our mission. These include Ribaat - an online academic seminary program for women (an attempt to increase the number of Muslim women religious leaders), Daybreak Press - a publishing wing (opening opportunities for Muslim women to publish), Daybreak Bookshop - a bookstore focused on community engagement that is

sometimes a pop-up mosque and other times a gathering space, Leadership & Legacy - a curriculum development project, and numerous other projects that include online spaces for group worship, teaching, and community support.

### **Positionality**

My positionality as a Muslim woman religious leader- a sheikha – set me in the center of the research. It opened doors of access to the women I hoped to observe and interview, unfurled lines of questioning that would be unknown to an outsider and allowed for a space of trust and openness. More specifically, I was positioned as a Muslim woman religious leader studying her colleagues.

As a feminist researcher, my positionality was more of an advantage than a disadvantage. My reputation and relationships offered a unique opportunity for questioning, trust and understanding of nuance related to the research.

As a religious leader, however, I recognized the potential concern that I would be spiritually evaluating the women I was interviewing. I attempted to offset this concern with a sincere description of my project and clarity in articulating my goal. I wanted to learn from the women I interviewed, and I entered the process with a readiness to change and grow based on what they taught me.

### **Problem Statement**

The power of the individual story to facilitate leadership is neatly laid out by Sarah Noonan (2007), “Leadership as both an individual and collective activity engages leaders and members in the exchange of personal, community, and global stories to support leadership within their families, organizations, communities, and the transglobal world.” (Noonan, 2007, p. xiii) Muslim women’s personal stories of leadership have often been left out of historical documents

and present-day reporting. This silencing has been an opportunity for stereotyping and pigeonholing. It has been, in some cases, a hindrance to their leadership and a stifling of their contributions.

As more and more women reached out to global communities through the internet, Muslim women's religious leadership began to be more visible (Ercetin & Bisaso, 2016). Questions of legitimacy and authority continued to circle around their work, but as their tweets and Facebook posts got passed around, more and more people began to accept Muslim women's religious leadership as commonplace. Today, as women teacher-leaders begin to emerge through the internet, we are presented with a challenge: to study and record the phenomena of Muslim women teacher-leaders in digital religion. Digital religion is defined by Heidi Campbell (2013) as a conceptual lens that sees religion practiced online and offline as deeply connected, "We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa," (Campbell, 2013, p. 4). She recognized digital religion as creating a third space wherein religion lives, outside of the churches, temples, synagogues and mosques, but within the faith lives of adherents. Muslim women are using these spaces, but we do not know which groups of Muslim women are using them or how. We do not know what it means to stand in this new place of digital religion as a leader of a traditional faith, and as a woman. There have been a few general studies about groups of Muslim women, piety movements, and a book was published in 2012 that examined changes in contemporary Islamic authority in regard to issues of gender (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012), but the dearth of personal stories of traditional women religious leaders' stories remained.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to remember women, understand their leadership, and make them part of the historical record for future generations. In order to further understanding of the phenomenon of Muslim women teacher leaders, the focused purpose of this study is threefold: (a) to listen to the life experiences of Muslim women teacher-leaders, (b) unravel the love-hate relationship of feminist action, feminism, and traditional Muslim women, and (c) understand how teacher-leaders are living within digital religion.

### **Recording History**

Recording women's lives and studying the phenomena of their leadership, is to move from a careful preservation of men's contributions to including women and their work and narratives as legacy.

### **Life Experience**

The origin story was stage one of feminist work (Devault, 1999) as researchers discovered and told the stories of women across disciplines. This excavation of stories began to give us the language women needed to talk about their issues and build a foundation upon which to ask deeper and wider research questions.

The life experiences of contemporary Muslim women teacher-leaders, indeed a prosopography of sorts, offer a window into their origin stories and helped us understand who they were, how they lived, and who they might become. I was curious about commonalities and connections. The meaning of their lives became manifest in the telling and recording of their narratives. The narratives of contemporary Muslim women teacher-leaders were both knowledge production and value-added material for the development of the field. Their stories

will also contribute to wider studies of women in religious leadership, women in leadership, and women in digital religion.

A phenomenology is “for practice and of practice” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 14) and so this study will help us to understand the practice of leadership as it is related to Muslim women in the twenty-first century.

### **Feminism and Faith**

What is the role of feminist thinking in the lives, intentions and actions of Muslim women teacher-leaders? Muslim women teacher-leaders were especially careful to avoid the use of the word feminist during my preliminary research, or to associate themselves with any of the academic Islamic feminists prominent today. In a pilot study conducted in the spring of 2017, a participant in my study, Sheikha Aysha Wazwaz, adamantly refused to self-identify as a feminist, though she freely admitted to facing rampant misogyny (personal communication, March 2017). She later authored a Facebook post denouncing feminism as disbelief (Wazwaz, 2017), but has also begun to write a book entitled “Islamic Feminism” in which she is looking for women who fight against misogyny within Islamic tradition (personal communication, April 2017).

In October of this year, I interviewed another Muslim woman religious leader, Dr. Jamillah Karim, who was less hesitant about the word ‘feminism’ but spoke in whispers and heavily qualified her comments (J. Karim, personal communication, October 2017). Helen L. Hunt, (2004) wrote, “... religion and feminism are different expressions of the same impulse toward making life more just and whole.” (Hunt, 2004, p. XXIII). Her book, *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance* is an attempt to both bring spirituality back to feminism and to remind secular feminists that faith can lead people to effective activism (Hunt, 2004). Gloria

Steinem wrote, “the withdrawal of god from women and nature ... justified the conquering of women and nature.” (Steinem, 2004, p. xvii). I have personally experienced the dichotomy between being feminist and religious in Muslim circles, where labeling oneself as feminist is associated with a ‘progressive’ vs. ‘traditional’ creed and renders the woman who calls herself feminist as questionable. Yet Muslim women religious leaders are in the business of solving problems, so they face misogyny and sexism daily. I sought, in this study, to understand how Muslim women religious leaders interacted with feminism in general and Islamic feminism in particular, tease out these connections and structure them so as to develop a deeper understanding of the type of feminism that motivated their tireless efforts and the feminist actions that underlined their work.

### **Religious Leadership and the Internet**

The Wall Street Journal ran an article in February 2002 entitled, “Islamerican: Meet Hamza Yusuf, ‘Rock Star’ of a Leader among US Muslims.” Here, Jonathan Kaufman (2002) inadvertently spoke to the new brand of leadership in Muslim communities – the celebrity leader. Bolstered by media platforms and the global reach of online communities, Muslim leadership has left the quiet halls of al-Azhar University and the corners of neighborhood mosques and entered an entirely new world.

This movement to public scholarship and leadership began with Rashid Rida and his weekly journal (Imady, 2005), continued with weekly radio and television preachers such as Imam Sha’rawi’s radio *tafsīr* (Quran exegesis) and Yusuf Qaradawi’s televised *fatwas* (religious rulings) (Bunt, 2003) and exploded with the internet where the audience was no longer limited to local printing or radio waves.

Mellor and Rinnawi (2016) described the new style of Muslim preacher as one who used to teach in mosques, but now teaches online via a variety of platforms. They cited Amr Khalid as an example of this new breed of popular preachers. Amr Khalid had 28.4 million followers on Facebook and 9.9 million followers on Twitter in November 2018 - he was indeed an example of the globalized Muslim leader.

The five traits of networked religion (Campbell & Garner, 2016) included the reality of shifting authority. As digital culture intertwined with religion, the question of “Who or what is a legitimate religious leader and gatekeeper of knowledge” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 74) became pertinent. Muslim women teacher-leaders sat on both sides of this question. On one hand, they were a threat to the male patriarchy of traditional leadership, and on the other the “flattening of traditional hierarchies” (Campbell & Garner, p. 64) was to their direct advantage. This double-edged sword was demonstrated by Dr. Farhat Hashmi’s exodus from Pakistan to Canada. Dr. Fatima Hashmi began her piety movement in Pakistan, was fought by the local mullahs and went to Canada, where she led hundreds of thousands of women in religious instruction and faith training via the internet (Ahmed, 2013). In November 2018, she had over 300,000 followers on her Facebook page.

In 2015, male Muslim teacher-leaders across the United States planned a private meeting to discuss modern issues and create a circle of practice (anonymous, personal communication, January 2016). However, a picture of their exclusive meeting was leaked, and Muslim women railed against them. For the first time in the modern history of religious leadership in Muslim spaces, the choice of who got to meet at the table became public business. In 2017, they invited women teacher-leaders to join them for their discussions (personal communication, September

2017). In this case the influence of the internet was palpable. Women teacher-leaders benefitted from digital culture and were newly called to the proverbial table of leadership decision making.

The internet has become an important part of what it means to be a Muslim woman teacher-leader and as such to study a Muslim woman teacher-leader without an eye to digital religion would be an inaccurate assessment. This study understands the importance of digital religion, leadership and feminism in attempting to understand the phenomena of the Muslim woman religious leader.

### **The Research Question**

What are the lived realities of Muslim women teacher-leaders? What is the interplay of digital culture? What is the essence of their leadership?

This research will enable serious academic consideration of questions surrounding women's leadership in Muslim communities. More broadly, I hope that this research will begin to answer larger questions about feminism and digital culture as they are related to Muslim women's leadership in general and changing patterns of women's leadership within the Islamic tradition. The research will also begin a process of thinking about pathways to leadership, communities of practice, and education for Muslim women teacher-leaders.

### **Traditional Religious Leadership**

Leadership in global Muslim communities varies depending on local laws regarding mosque organization and non-profit restrictions, etc. However, the professionalization of the field in the USA contributed to a formalization of salaried work in the field of religious leadership. This combined with the heavy presence of Muslim leadership and celebrity imams and sheikhs online has meant that many of the following leadership words have become commonly understood internationally.



Leadership in the United States is “primarily shared among five overlapping types: local administrative mosque leaders, leaders of national and regional organizations, public intellectuals, imams, and chaplains,” (Yuskaev & Stark, 2014). I would add to this the resident scholar, which is a new salaried position available in some communities. All of these roles can be identified as global trends as well, with the possible exception of chaplains.

### **Titles**

Most familiar terms that denote religious leadership of Muslims refer to men, though the larger all-encompassing terms do include the possibility of women in their ranks. Though Muslims lack clergy, religious leadership is usually described within two major categories: the *ulama* (scholar-leaders) and *awliya'* (spiritual leaders). Both types of leaders historically stood out and achieved leadership status because of great scholarship, transformative piety, and virtuous character and worshipful lives, though some of these words are used differently in modern contexts and no longer refer to such lofty origins. The following terms are mostly categorized under the category of *ulama*, or scholar leaders. The *awliya'*, or spiritual leaders, used other words that are less common in modern vernacular Arabic and are generally not used in English language discussions of Muslim leadership for a number of reasons. (Please see Appendix A for a list of the transliteration rules followed in this work.).

**Imam.** The term *imam* is an Arabic word that liturgically refers to a leader of prayers. Literally and semantically it is a word that means “leader” and typically only applies to leadership within the religious context which can take a number of forms. In this context anyone can be an imam, though there are legal preferences related to knowledge and age according to the various schools of religious rulings (Jaziri, 2009). Women can also be imams, especially for

other women (Jaziri, 2009) and in some cases and according to a few rare opinions, for men as well (Jahangir, 2017).

The term is also used to denote community leadership. Imam Warith Deen Muhammad was an example of this use of the term. As the son of Elijah Muhammad, he took leadership of the Nation of Islam after his father's death and, as imam (leader), led them through a dramatic, but smooth, move into mainstream Sunni Islam.

Job postings for imams usually included as part of the job description “lead prayers”, and as such women were automatically excluded for traditionalists. However, Halima Krausen served as imam of her traditional Muslim community in Hamburg, Germany for over 20 years without drama or dispute (Spielhaus, 2012; personal communication, 2018).

In all cases, however, the term imam implied a person who could impart knowledge about Islam; a thought leader and/or a teacher. Indeed, the founders of the schools of religious law and practice are remembered today; Imam Shafi`i, Imam Malik, Imam Abu Hanifa, and Imam Ahmad. They are known for their teaching as much as they are known for their legal opinions.

**Mufti.** One who makes religious rulings. Historically, muftis were appointed by government officials to help organize religious and civil life and majority Muslim countries usually have a Grand Mufti who has been appointed to deliberate questions of religion relevant to the society. A famous modern-day mufti is Mufti Menk. He uses the honorific as part of his online presence and is (in 2018) the head of the fatwa department of the Council of Islamic Scholars of Zimbabwe.

Not all muftis are government appointees, of course. There are many who have been trained in the art and science of ‘fatwa’ – religious rulings. In fact, it is possible to become a

mufti through online study. The Imam Shafi`i institute offered an (mostly) online program that was open to men and women and was termed a mufti course; or a track to becoming a mufti (personal emails). It is also possible to be a mufti but not use the term as an honorific.

Muftis around the world, as academics, are also considered teachers. The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Ibrahim `Abdel-Karim `Allam, has his PhD from al-Azhar university and previous to his appointment worked as head of Islamic Jurisprudence and Shari`a law at Al-Azhar University, Tanta Branch (Abdel-Bakey, 2019). The mufti of Tuzla, Bosnia, Vahid Fazlovic is a professor of Islamic Sciences (personal communication, 2018), and the previous Mufti of Damascus, Sheikh Ahmad Kiftaro was best known for his teaching at Masjid Abu Nur (personal communication, 2000).

**Sheikh and related titles.** The literal meaning of the term *sheikh* Arabic is ‘elder’ and was used before Islam for elders of a tribe; later it also came to be used as an honorific for religious scholars and spiritual leaders. The meaning of tribal elder has always continued to be in usage across Arab societies. The term sheikh usually means an advanced teacher, one who can be trusted to impart accurate information and sound advice. In the Sufi tradition, a sheikh is a close advisor and mentor on the spiritual path (Mayer, 2005). Other terms that stand in for sheikh include: *habib*, *anse*, *ustadh*, and *ustadha*.

The term sheikh is used for men and *sheikha* for women. *Habib* is a term used by Yemeni and Indonesian sheikhs who are descendants of the Prophet of Islam and also religious teachers. It literally means beloved, but is used as an honorific instead of ‘sheikh’. *Anse*, meaning “Miss, or teacher” is a term used for women teachers in the Levante. The term is used to refer to one’s religious advisor/teacher, but it is also used as an honorific for female teachers of secular subjects in schools. The term *Abla* , literally “Miss or teacher” is used in the same way in Egypt

and in the Gulf, and the term *Apa*, literally “big sister” is often used in Britain amongst ethnically Indian or Pakistani people to mean the same. *Ustadh* and *Ustadha* are classical Arabic terms that literally mean “one who is accomplished in a subject and capable of teaching it” and are used to refer to either an advisor/teacher of religion and/or a teacher of secular subjects in schools.

These terms are fluid but generally the people who carry them give them meaning.

Hamza Yusuf, Faraz Rabani, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi all go by the honorific sheikh, though each has a different educational background and they are varied in their particular spiritual or religious bent (Zaman, 2006). In the modern Muslim context, the term sheikh (or sheikha) often refers to a level above the more generic terms of *ustadh/anse/abla* and indicates influence beyond qualifications. In all cases, however, those who carry the term in the religious context would be considered those who teach, and indeed the three mentioned previously are instructors and/or teachers. Hamza Yusuf teaches at Zaytuna College, Faraza Rabani was the main teacher at Seekers Guidance until January 2019, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi teaches on his television show that airs on al-Jazeera (the state-funded Arabic language network broadcast from Doha, Qata) as well as the website IslamOnline, which he helped to found in 1997 (Bunt, 2000).

**Ulama (pl); ‘*Ālam* (s).** Ulama are the learned class of (mostly male) religious scholars (Al-Habib, 2012). In Pakistan, these religious leaders are termed *mullah* (Ahmad, 2013).

Traditionally the *ulama* (or the *mullahs*) would teach classes in a mosque.

**Awliya (pl); *Wali* (s):** A *wali* is a person of God, one of great spiritual knowledge, and who seeks an inner way to God (Al-Habib, 2012). Traditional, or Sufi paths, would have *awliya* in their ranks, and each would be a teacher of that path. Often the *awliya* were also of the *ulama*, and so would be teachers of both spiritual practices and religious law.

It is difficult to label a living person as one of the awliya, but there have been those who wrote about those who they considered ‘saints’ or awliya. ‘Attār (d. 1221) wrote a 72 chapter book entitled “*Tazkirāt al-Awliya*” or Biographies of the Saints and Renard (2008) more recently published a book entitled *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* where he demonstrates through story the influence of the awliya historically and in more modern times. The question of who is designated as a friend of God is an important one as it addresses questions of religious authority in Islam, it is, however, beyond the scope of this research.

### **Teacher-Leader**

Terminology around religious leadership is vague in Muslim communities, and thus it is difficult to understand how religious leadership itself is defined. The most common denominator of all the terms, however, is an element of education and teaching. Religious leadership in Muslim communities is intricately linked to teaching and learning, and it is nearly impossible to separate teaching from leadership or leadership from teaching within Islamic contexts. From Prophet Muhammad to the founders of the legal schools, to the leaders of early piety movements, - every religious leader was defined in the context of teaching and/or as a teacher.

This understanding of the importance of teaching and teacher to the leadership role of religious leaders and influencers is critical to unraveling the mystery of Muslim religious leadership. Recognizing the role of teaching in leadership in the context of religious guidance is vital to developing a lens for research and insight into the phenomena of Muslim women religious leadership. I used the term “teacher-leader” throughout the present study to refer to someone who was a religious leader in Muslim communities. In this case her primary focus was the leading, teaching, and upbringing of community members, whether that community was

local, global, online and/or offline. I recognize the contributions of academics and researchers to the work of teacher-leaders, but in my working definition they would not qualify for this research if they were not practicing members of the religion of their audience, or the people whom their work influences. An academic who was also a practicing member of the religion and the community, would be included as a teacher-leader, but one who was not, would not.

### **Summary**

This research is focused on discovering the lived experiences of Muslim women who work in the world of religious leadership – teacher-leaders. I am attempting to understand the essence of their leadership as they lead in digital religion.

The work is important for knowledge production, discovery of origin stories, and to understand the role of Muslim women teacher-leaders in digital religion. Furthermore, we know well that Muslim women teacher-leaders exist in the world, as we will discover in the next chapter, but we know next to nothing about their persons, who they are and why they do their work. This study will attempt to identify, describe and explain the very essence of Muslim women's religious leadership.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Literature Review**

Women in religious leadership, Muslim women as teacher-leaders past and present, and digital religion give context to the present study. How are Christian and Jewish women fairing as leaders in their respective faiths? Is there a precedent for Muslim women to be teacher-leaders? What is digital religion and how are Christian, Jewish and Muslim women navigating the online/offline environments? We also want to know if there have been related studies in the life experiences of Muslim women teacher-leaders, and if so, how they relate (if at all) to the present study.

### **Women in Religious Leadership**

The Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have many commonalities. Some are theological - all three share the same history of prophets and a claim to one God (traditional Christian theology claims that God is one though three, in a complicated discussion of the trinity, but for our purposes, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all claim the same singular God-head). Other commonalities are geographical, as all three claim the importance of Jerusalem and other important sites in today's Middle East. The three faiths have intertwined histories of persecution, battles for power, and oppression (Spain, World War II, the Crusades – to name a few) and they also share a modern battle for women's leadership in their various holy spaces and communities of faith. For the purposes of this study, we will look at the struggle of women for leadership positions in the three Abrahamic faiths alone. This is not to say that Buddhist and Hindu women, and women of many other faiths could not lend important additions to our understanding of women in religious leadership, but they will be set aside for now and await further research.

### **Christianity and Feminism**

The battle for women's rights in the western hemisphere began in the mid-nineteenth century and a number of scholars have linked feminist movements to eighteenth-century evangelical movements. Movements of religious renewal gave women opportunities to gather together, organize for social concerns, and preach (Rendall, 1985; Walker, 2010; DeVries, 2010). The relationship between Christianity and feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was so tightly woven that the very terminology and culture of feminism was representative of Christianity (deVries, 2010). The British suffragist movement used terms rooted squarely in Christian theology: they termed those against them as 'Pharisees' and/or 'Crucifiers' and modeled their rallies after evangelical revivalist meetings (deVries, 2010). British suffragettes also developed suffrage leagues based in denominations and representing popular religious groups. These leagues operated in a complicated space of denial and acceptance: they denied the violence of the British suffragettes and patriarchal social norms of their religious adherents, while embracing the mission (another Christian term) of voting rights as a Divine right (deVries, 2010).

The abolitionist movement was the foundation of the American feminist movement and it, too, was underlined by religious beliefs. One hundred and eighty women met in New York in 1837 for the Anti-Slavery convention of American Women – they called their work “the cause of God” and vowed to work together in the “Divine work” of abolishing slavery (Hunt, 2004).

As women worked in evangelism or anti-slavery leagues, they practiced “speaking in public, chairing committees, writing reports, keeping accounts” (Rendall, 1985, p. 322). Even though feminism had its roots in Christian practice, it later rejected religion in favor of a more secular approach, at times forgetting the very women of faith who stood strong in the early days (Hunt, 2004; Rendall, 1985). Women like Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day, and Lucretia Mott



were all outwardly religious women, and all were part of the early feminist movement (Hunt, 2004). Truth was a well-known abolitionist who had once been a slave herself. She was deeply religious and was the Massachusetts's delegate at the first national Women's Rights Convention (Hunt, 2004). Lucretia Mott was a Quaker, became a minister in 1921, and was one of the authors of the Declaration of Sentiments, a document based on the Declaration of Independence but focused on women's rights (Hunt, 2004). Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement and participated in hunger strikes for votes in the early twentieth century (Hunt, 2004). All three of these women embodied the Christian origins of the western feminist movement.

This complicated relationship between Christianity and feminism was not unique. Muslims have also been in a relationship of push and pull since feminism became a ready term to describe women fighting gender oppression.

### **Muslims and Feminism**

Western thinkers stereotyped Muslims and accused them of being incapable of creating a Muslim feminism, and then Muslims turned around and accused the west of interfering with their societies (Badran, 2009). Muslim women stood between two opposing voices - one declared that Islam was inherently unjust, and that Muslim women were oppressed because of their religion. The other contended that the status quo was fine. They railed against the immorality they saw in feminism and declared feminism apostasy (Badran, 2009). Nonetheless, two feminisms that were born of Muslim women and grew to serve them, became apparent in the twentieth century. Secular feminism was concerned with access to education, work, political rights, and women at the mosque. In essence it advocated for women living in the public sphere. Islamic feminism, on the other hand, combined both the public and the private sphere and its proponents began to

practice *ijtihad* (legal reasoning within Islamic contexts) to reexamine family structures, rethink religious professions and discuss mosque rituals per women's roles (Badran, 2009).

Zainab al-Ghazali was an example of a Muslim woman teacher-leader who lived between the two feminisms mentioned above. She was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and went to prison in Egypt in 1965 for her religious activism (al-Ghazali, 1994). She also divorced her husband because he interfered with her Islamic work, yet she did not call herself a feminist, and claimed to be fighting against a government that wanted to establish the "civilization of the western woman in Egypt and the rest of the Arab and Islamic world." (Badran, 2009, p. 149). Muslim women were fighting on two fronts. They did not want to capitulate to the western gender ideology that came with baggage around dress and the sexual revolution, but they did want to establish women's spiritual and material rights (Badran, 2009). They were fighting against western ideas imposed upon them and fighting for socio-political rights stolen from them.

### **Christian and Jewish Women in Religious Leadership**

Christian women and Jewish women of faith have both found ways to achieve leadership and find change-maker positions in their communities. The first female Reform Judaism rabbi, Sally Preisand, was ordained in 1972 (Laznow, 2014). Amy Eilberg, the first conservative rabbi, was ordained in 1985 (Laznow, 2014), and recently (in 2009) Sara Hurwitz was granted the title of Rabba by Rabbi Avi Weiss making her the first (disputed, but nonetheless ordained) Orthodox Rabbi (Ferziger, 2015). The United States recorded 685 women Christian clergy in 1910 and a massive 61.6% increase in 1930 of 1787 female clergy (Brekus, 2014). All of this growth came to a sudden halt, however, with the adoption of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment<sup>3</sup> (Brekus, 2014). A

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<sup>3</sup> The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

widespread attitude change began to seep into churches as women who sought leadership were labeled as feminist and part of the modernist (read: immoral) culture that most church leaders were fighting against. It took nearly fifty years for women to return to ordination, clergy positions, and church leadership (Campbell-Redd, 2018).

The Catholic church offered women leadership as nuns and saints, but for the most part women were not allowed to be priests. Having said that, in an exception that perhaps ‘proved the rule’ it was said that Theosebia, sister of Gregory of Nyssa, was a presbyter of the church, ascribed priesthood, and was confirmed to do the work of “sacred alters” by Pope Gelasius in a letter dating March 11, 494 (Ramelli, 2010). She was indeed an anomaly, however. The Catholic feminist theologians of the twentieth century dealt with a strong patriarchal system that claimed its right in the maleness of God: since God is male, men are more qualified to lead the church (Daly, 1985). And though there were ‘underground’ female priests (Zagano, 2011) and certainly a movement pushing for women in the priesthood, Catholic churches continued as one of the few remaining Christian denominations that drew a hard line on women’s ability to stand as religious leader and lead the church.

Protestant denominations, on the other hand, have seen a steady growth in female leadership. This is perhaps do to the early effects of evangelism, which opened doors to women’s participation in political and community affairs (Rendall, 1985; deVries, 2014) and gave women a pulpit as missionary.

Baptists ordained their first woman in 1815, but later changed their mind and forbid the ordaining of women, hence their numerical growth in the twentieth century was low at 13% of clergy as women (Campbell-Reed, 2018). Unitarian Universalist churches (some of the earliest feminist suffragettes originated in this church (deVries, 2004) reached 57% female clergy by

2018. And the Presbyterian Church ordained its first female minister in 1956 (Campbell-Redd 2018; Walker, 2010).

The story of Ella Simmons and her quest to become a religious leader demonstrated the space of struggle between women of faith and church (or any religious) authorities. Ella Simmons was a Pentecostal who, in 1907 experienced Jesus and felt that she had been called to preach. She asked to be ordained as a minister (Roebuck, 2012). The Pentecostal church believed in a Spirit baptism, wherein authority could be directly given to adherents through God, but as followers of Paul in the New Testament who famously said, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (1 Timothy 2:11-12), did not believe that women should lead the home or the church. The tension lay between text and a woman of faith who came forth to say, “I have been called by God to serve.” The struggle to reconcile these tensions, along with a general fear of what might happen if women took over, was common across the theological borders of Abrahamic faiths. In Ella Simmons case, the church allowed an evangelist license, or certificate, and not ordination because the third General Assembly of the Church of God had agreed in 1908 that women might serve the church in ways that men do (they listed a number of jobs) but that they would not be ordained. The license that Simmons received was available for men and women and allowed her to be a deacon, evangelist, assistant pastor, pastor (though only in the absence of an available man), exhorter, music minister, educational minister, teacher, editor, and missionary (Roebuck, 2012). It was an exhaustive list to be sure. Interestingly, since 2005 one of the general vice presidents of the Seventh-day Adventists church has been a woman named Ella Simmons. She was the highest-ranking woman in the church. She addressed the tension between being ‘called’ and official support from the church in an interview to Adventist media, “I think that the church really is ready for women, at all levels, and

in all roles, to fully accept God's call on their lives, and to function in those roles, officially sanctioned by the Church." (Delgado, 2008).

The status of Jewish women became part of the conversation in the nineteenth century, when the question of suffrage began the feminist movement in western societies (Hyman, 2002). Like their Christian (and Muslim) sisters, the tension between text and life became an important discussion. Some Jewish women spoke of the unique status of women in Judaism and others held tightly to their traditions even when the men began to desert tradition (Hyman, 2002). In America the number of female Torah specialists increased, and they began to aspire to the role of Rabbi, as they took on teaching and other duties within orthodoxy (Feziger, 2018). Even as Orthodoxy pushed back against female rabbis, other denominations embraced them. Non-orthodox movements in Israel have even begun ordaining women, a full twenty years after their sisters were ordained in the USA (Laznow, 2014).

### **Living as a Religious Leader**

These newly ordained leaders, however, often suffered the cultural backlash of role incongruity (Ferguson, 2017). The cultural image of clergy was male, yet the pastoral role was filled with feminine imagery of caring and nurturing (Ferguson, 2017). Women clergy struggled with their leadership roles as they navigated the difference between expectations and requirements. Women (outside of the Universalists) remained the minority in religious leadership, but in 2013, the percentage of Christian female seminarians was 31%, showing an increase from earlier years (Ferguson, 2017).

Some challenges facing women were specific to the various traditions and practices of a particular denomination that affected opportunity - in the choice of the Church of God to give a license instead of an ordination, for example. Sometimes there were invisible barriers, or

cultural barriers that carried over from the wider community such as attitudes about women and their capacity to lead and to preach. Family life could have an effect on women's ability to devote themselves to full-time ministerial work, and as such they were more likely to hold part-time and interim positions (Wong, Worthy, Fung & Chen, 2017). Other challenges included a pay-gap, which was manifested both in difficulty in finding jobs and differentiation in pay. Ordination did not mean acceptance by a congregation, and women generally did not get the higher paying jobs in churches and sometimes struggled to even find employment (Christian Century, 2017).

**Why is there resistance to women in religious leadership?** Women constituted 60% of participants in church and yet only 6.2% of church leaders were women (Wong et al., 2017). Church clergy, rabbis, and Muslim scholars were resisting the idea of women as leaders, why? Much of the research points to a fear of modernity as the culprit of resistance. Religious life often relied on women as keepers of tradition (Brekus, 2014). In this scenario women who worked in religious life as caregivers or children's teachers were welcome. But women who wanted the pulpit, or desired leadership, were seen as breaking with the basic virtue of modesty and humbleness. Modernity, as represented by a salad of 'isms' and a stew of flexible morals, is alarming to traditional and conservative people of faith. When women pushed for leadership the resistance was sometimes forceful with a pushback of self-righteous claims to authority and power, as the rabbis who pushed back against female ordination after Hurwitz ordained the first rabba (Ferziger, 2018), or the angry responses to Amina Wadud's leading of a mixed prayer (Aryanti, 2013), or the excommunication of the bishops who ordained underground Catholic women (Zagano, 2011). It was a visceral response, one not necessarily based in text or tradition, as much as it was based in fear and foreboding.

## **Feminist Theology**

Feminist theologians sought to find the voice of women in the interpretation of sacred texts (Jantzen, 1999). They struggled with core belief systems that oppressed women or challenge women's status as full people of faith. Mary Daly (1985) in her first book *The Church and the Second Sex*, challenged the church for systemic oppression of women. Elizabeth Johnson (2002) argued that God does not have gender, and Grace Jantzen (1999) built a feminist philosophy of religion rooted in women's experiences and their ability to reach that which was Divine. Muslim feminist theologians argued for a new methodology of Quranic exegesis that reinterpreted verses and events in a feminist light (Hedytallah, 2015), a re-examination of the authenticity of certain *hadith* or sayings of the Prophet of Islam (Barazangi, 2016), and a new look at cultural norms and written law around familial relationships (Badran, 2009).

As feminist theologians worked within their respective faiths and bravely faced patriarchal and misogynist issues, they often neglected the needs and views of women of faith and lost relevance as religious leaders. Mary Daly (1984) expanded her writings to include ideas around witchcraft and began to identify as "post-Christian" (Daly, 1984), thereby separating herself from mainstream Christians. Some Islamic feminists took to such shocking interpretations as claiming that Abraham was a 'dead-beat dad' (Wadud, 2013), insisting on disregarding ritual rules of prayer (Elliot, 2005) and asserting that a vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election was an 'anti-extremist' vote (Nomani, 2016), and thereby separating themselves from mainstream Muslims.

While feminist theologians pointed accusing fingers at practical problems of misogyny and patriarchy, they did not become religious leaders of the faithful. Certainly, their work

opened doors and influenced the work of women religious leaders in their respective faiths, but many traditional leaders distanced themselves from their feminist rhetoric.

Muslim women teacher-leaders were especially careful to avoid the use of the word feminist or to associate themselves with any prominent academic Islamic feminists. Fatima Seedat (2013) discussed the convergence of Islam and feminism, and the problem of terminology. She traced the development of critical analysis of Islam from a gendered perspective in the work of Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, and Amina Wudud and recognized the harsh criticism they endured. This was the first approach to the convergence of Islam and feminism. The second, she said, was constructed in western academia and labeled Muslim women's gender analysis of Islam as "Islamic Feminism". The third approach she called "taking Islam for granted" (Seedat, 2013, p. 406) and these women approached feminist issues within discussions about Islam but did not accept the label of Islamic feminist or feminism for that matter (Seedat, 2013).

While the term feminism was controversial, and especially the phrase "Islamic Feminism", which implied a western viewpoint and a critical, uncomfortable for traditionalists, academic stance against religion, feminism was an important part of understanding women's experiences. Other feminist theologians have been more careful to include practitioners. Women and men who spoke from within the tradition were often more successful at presenting a feminist attitude, even if the term itself was not employed.

In *Becoming Divine, towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Jantzen (1999) explored the possibility that western studies of religion were gendered – as opposed to the religion itself. She looked to symbols of the masculine and the feminine as she analyzed western religion. These thoughts were echoed in the Sufi concepts of Ibn Arabi, whose controversial but



fully orthodox writings described the feminine quality in God's name al-Rahman (the Merciful), and eschewed ideas that precluded female imam roles in mixed gender prayers (al-Shayal, 2017). His was a feminism rooted in the struggle of each person to become connected to the Divine – or of a friend of God (Hakim, 2002).

Elizabeth Johnson (2002) approached feminism and faith as an insider, grounded in classical Catholic theology, but included women's experiences. Her argument against a gendered God, though heavily criticized, did not change her status as a nun or as a professor at a Jesuit institute. This type of work, grounded in traditional Islamic theology but including women's experiences, was often missing in Muslim theological circles.

### **Muslim Women in Religious Leadership**

Dr. Akram Nadwi's unpublished forty volume work about women scholars included examples of women "teaching hadith classes of men and women students in the principal mosques and colleges...; issuing fatwas; interpreting the Quran; challenging the rulings of qādīs; criticizing rulers; preaching to people to reform their ways – and in all this being approved and applauded by their peers among men" [fatwa: religious ruling; qādī: judge] (Nadwi, 2008, p. XIV). The introduction alone became a published book about the *Muhaddithāt*, or women transmitters of hadith. It covered their teachers, their accomplishments, and their role in the creation of foundational knowledge and creed.

Akram Nadwi (2007) described the difficulty of uncovering information about women teacher-leaders in history. He described the path to his multi-volume work about historical Muslim women scholars as a path of discovery. He had read an article in a British newspaper that blamed Islam for the condition of ignorance among Muslim women, and he thought about the women he had read about in hadith narrations and set out to gather information about them so

that he could write about them and encourage Muslim women. He said, “That’s how it started. I’ve never had an idea to do such a big thing. I was just thinking it could be done, hardly it’s like 20 women or 30 women, something like that.” The study grew to over fifty volumes of thousands of women, yet unpublished (personal communication, 2018).

Building on Nadwi’s research, Asma Sayeed (2013), in her book *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, presented historical case studies of the first ten centuries of scholarly women. Her work provided historical context for the investigation of how modern women participated in religious activism, and to what degree they claimed legitimacy from historical connections to earlier scholarly leaders. While she offered the case studies as examples - or evidentiary fuel for modern feminist concerns - her study of ten centuries of women’s agency and involvement in scholarly pursuits was carefully looked at through a lens of historicity without reading in misogyny or contemporary feminist discourse (Sayeed, 2013). Her studies included many women, the most prominent of which were: Aisha bint Abu Bakr from the foundational stage (7<sup>th</sup> century); `Amra bint `Abdu al-Rahman from the successor stage (8<sup>th</sup> century); Karima al-Marwaziyya of the classical stage (late 10<sup>th</sup> century); and Shuhda al-Katiba (11<sup>th</sup> century) in the period of traditionalism. These women were prominent scholars, teachers and influential members of the religious elite. They were deferred to and held in esteem (Sayeed, 2013).

Sayeed (2013) traced the decline of women’s contributions throughout time. In her conclusions she talked about the drastic decline in women’s contributions after the first century and pointed out that those who were prominent either had male relatives or were very ascetic along with their scholarship (Sayeed, 2013). She said that there was no real explanation for why women’s scholarship and teaching surged in the tenth century, nor for why it declined again.

She mentioned a new hadith school that opened in Damascus in 2001 whose primary goal was to return the “centrality of hadith studies as an integral aspect of the religious education of women.” (Sayeed, 2013, p. 195). She pointed out that this school, and others similar in Indonesia and Morocco, sought to reconnect to the origin story of `Aisha bint Abu-Bakr and open doors to foundational learning for women (Sayeed, 2013)

### **Muslim Women Teacher-Leaders of Lore**

Sacred text for Muslims includes both the Quran and the hadith. The Quran is considered the revealed book of God and was memorized in its entirety during the first generation and until this day (Mattson, 2008). Muslim historians asserted that the Quran was completely recorded and compiled within three years of the death of Muhammad. Hence the authenticity of the Quran is not debated in Muslim circles. On the other hand, the hadith – or sayings, deeds, and interactions of the Prophet of Islam - were recorded over centuries of people passing them from one to another and as a result there were grades of authenticity. The act of transmitting a hadith and that hadith qualifying as valid for the early hadith scholars carried numerous conditions and qualifications. Those who were transmitters, and/or carriers of hadith were automatically in both teaching and leadership positions in Muslim communities regardless of gender. The first century of Muslim history was considered an exemplar period for women’s scholarship (Nadwi, 2007). Aisha bint Abu Bakr, famous for her role in the establishment of canonical sources for the development of shariah law, narrated 2210 hadith, and Abu Mūsa al-`Ashari (a well-known male companion of the Prophet of Islam) said about her, “Whenever a matter became difficult for us, we asked Aisha about it and found that she had knowledge about our issue,” (Tirmidhi, #6194). Other women were prolific narrators and teachers from this era as well. Um Salama (Hind) bint Abu Umayma narrated 328 hadith and was allocated a special salary for her work as a teacher

during the caliphate of `Umar ibn al-Khattab (Tabaa', 2004). Asma' bint Yazid, an Ansari (one of the local residents of Medina) woman, narrated 81 hadith and was sought by second generation Muslims as a teacher-leader (Tabaa', 2004).

The second generation included the student of `Aisha bint Abu Bakr, `Amra bint Abdul Rahman of whom it was said, "Qasim bin Muhammad said to me (Zuhri); 'I see my boy that you are greedy for knowledge. Should I not inform you of the vessel of knowledge? Go and stick to `Amra for she was under the guardianship of `Aisha.'" And I went to her and found her an ocean. Its water never ends." (al-Dhahabi). Um Dardā' was another important teacher-leader of this era. Ibn Kathīr said about her, "She was a tābi'iyyah [of the first generation], worshipper, scholar, and jurist. Men studied with her and learned *fiqh* [Islamic legal practices] from her in her teaching places on the north side of the mosque..." (Ibn Kathīr, vol. 9, para. 1).

The fifth century after the death of the Prophet of Islam found a decrease in the ratio of women to men in scholarly endeavors, though the overall number of scholars increased. Nadwi (2007) postulated that the need to travel arduous terrain may have been a hindrance to women. By the fifth century non-Arab women had become Hadith scholars; including Fatima bint Abi Ali al-Hasan from Nishapur (Nadwi, 2007).

The sixth to the ninth century saw women involved in Hadith dissemination and teaching in Syria and Egypt. The famous scholar Ibn Najjar is said to have studied with 400 women of this period (Nadwi, 2007).

In 2004 Aisha Bewley wrote *Muslim Women: A Biographical Dictionary* in order to provide a modern reference for Muslim women scholars, leaders, and community activists. Her dictionary covered twelve centuries and listed women in alphabetical order by first name. Though the dictionary had numerous entries, it also underlined the difficulty of excavating

women's stories. Some of the women were missing portions of their names, their birth and death dates, and numerous details of their lives were missing. The entries were sometimes one short sentence, and at most a paragraph. While it was a valuable contribution to the process of recording women's lives and contributions, it was very limited.

**Sufi women.** Often cited when modern scholars looked to the past to find significant teacher-leaders, Sufi women had a rich history of authority and leadership to draw from. The most famous Sufi woman, Rabi`a al-`Adawiya (from the second century post the prophetic era), is often referenced regarding her piety, poetry, and succinct advice to her contemporary male teacher-leaders (Helminski, 2003). Sufism, the mystical science of Islam, was a place of empowerment for women. Many legends and narrations existed around the bold and confident personalities of early Sufi women. Fatima of Damascus, for example, who, after listening to a lecture from a famous scholar of her age (mid-ninth century), said to him, "O Abū al-Hassan! You spoke very eloquently, and you have perfected the art of rhetoric. Have you perfected the art of silence?" (Helminski, 2004, p37) to which Abu al-Hasan responded by choosing silence thereafter. Muslim women in the Sufi tradition have been venerated as saints and trusted to guide others on the spiritual path. They have both claimed authority and accepted it when it was offered to them. Ibn Arabi, one of the foremost scholars of Sufi thought, for example, had a women teacher named Sheikha Fatima. He remembered her miracles and her blessings and spoke fondly of her and with respect (al-Shayyal, 2017). But we do not have Sheikha Fatima's voice describing her own experience, nor do we have her writings or her teachings.

**`Aisha al-Bā`ūniyyah.** She was one of the few women scholars from these periods of whom we still have some of her writings. She died in 923 h. (1517) and so can be considered a scholar of the tenth century. She was a *hafitha* (memorized the entire Quran) and she was

learned in the Islamic sciences and in the sciences of spirituality associated with Sufism. She was part of the Qādirriyyah spiritual order. She was a poet and a scholar, known for her spiritual strength and was a source of advice and blessing to her contemporaries (Homerin, 2016).

ʿAishah was a prolific poet, but we have only two surviving collections; *The Collected Verse of ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʾūniyyah* and *Emanation of Grace and the Gathering Union* poetic journals that began with her experiences as a novice Sufi and included her accomplishments as a deeply spiritual woman. Her poetry often began with statements reminiscent of modern social media posts, “When rapture was intense,” and “From His inspiration upon her during a session of mystical audition,” (Homerin, 2016, p. xxiii) which was fascinating considering the push and pull of the private and public worlds of women in Muslim history and even today. She also wrote a guidebook for seekers of a spiritual life entitled, *The Principles of Sufism* and included chapters on repentance, sincerity, meditative remembrance, and love. This book survived and was translated in 2016.

***Nana Asmāʾu.*** The twelfth century (Hijri, eighteenth century CE) featured one of the few women whose life as a scholar, teacher and community activist was well preserved, researched and reported in this century.

Nana Asmāʾu was a highly respected and extraordinarily creative and innovative leader. She was born in 1793, married in 1807, and had her first child at twenty years old in 1813. Six years later she wrote her first known long work of prose poetry. In 1817 her father and leader of the Sokota Caliphate, Usman Dan Fodio, died. Her beloved brother and colleague died in 1837 and her husband, who was her confidant and dear friend, passed away in 1849 (Boyd, 1989).

Nana Asmāʾu read, wrote and conversed in three languages (Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa). She was a *hafitha* (one who memorized the Quran), knowledgeable about *hadith*

(traditions, sayings and deeds of the Prophet of Islam), experienced in military science and an expert in the ability to translate sacred text into practical community values. She was well known for her scholarship, her influence and her vision (Boyd, 1989, Boyd & Mack, 2000).

Asmā'u's writings tell of her leadership role and the few letters preserved in the collection that were written to her underlined her elevated place in society. She exchanged letters with Aliyu b. Ibrahim at a time of controversy wherein a dispute about whether Muhammad Bello (Caliph and brother to Nana Asmā'u) had become a Tijanniyya (an alternative Sufi movement. Bello's father, the *Shehu*, was Qadiriyya, hence the controversy). The prose introduction to the original text said, "Aliyu son of Ibrahim known as "Ahijo" took to his heart the poetry of Umaru son of Sheikh Muhammad son of Sheikh al-Mukhtar, and the poetry of our leader, Asmā'u daughter of Usman, the spiritual light of his times." (Boyd & Mack, 1997, p. 287). He wrote to her with great reverence:

The girls (referring to the poems of Nana Asmā'u) who came to me  
wore flowing robes and walked proudly  
They were the two daughters of a noble lady, her name?  
It is a plural noun.  
She is famous for her erudition and saintliness which  
Are as a bubbling spring to scholars  
Her knowledge, patience and sagacity she puts to good  
Use, as did her forbearers. (Boyd, & Mack, 1997, p. 287/681)

Here we are told that the *Ahijo* (meaning leader) was influenced by an earlier poem from Nana Asmā'u, and then his own poem acknowledged her good qualities.

In another exchange between Nana Asmā'u and Sheikh Sa'ad, a scholar from Gwanda, we again recognize great respect and reverence in his letter to her:

Greetings to you, O woman of excellence and fine traits!  
In every century there appears  
One who excels. The proof of her merit has become well known,

east and west, near and far.

She is marked by wisdom and kind deeds; her knowledge is like the wide sea  
Sincere greetings, benefactions and felicitations from one who loves your  
family.

Restless from travelling deserts I long to meet you and your good traits again.  
From someone like you, welcome and acceptance is sought, for them, that the  
happiness of any person would be fulfilled.

Indeed I was delighted and gladdened by what I heard from you, even though I  
could not see you.

I praise God for having graced me with your concern about me while I am far  
away.

I do not deserve your concern while I am away, but I pray for our forgiving  
Lord's love

The heart ends up longing for its Lord, for such is the love of His servants  
If Sa'ad has ever been fortunate and happy, it is due to the abundance of your  
beneficence and overflowing grace. (Boyd & Mack, 1997, pp. 284-285/678-  
680)

This testimony to Nana Asmā'u's role in society tells us that she was well-known, that her approval was sought by men as well as women and that it was suspected that she was the inheritor of her father's spiritual authority. The line, "In every century there appears, one who excels," refers to the hadith of Muhammad that foretells of a *mujadid* or revivalist of religion that would appear every hundred years to revive and renew Islam for its followers. "God will raise for this community at the end of every hundred years the one who will renew its religion for it." (Sunan Abu Dawud). Sheikh Sa'ad indicated that he thought this person was Nana Asmā'u. This was a significant claim, and one that Asmā'u did not reject in her response to him.

Finally, Asmā'u is also recorded to have written to a Mauritanian scholar who she referred to as Brother – indicating their status as intellectual and spiritual equals. In this letter, she was congratulating him for his pilgrimage in what was an exchange between leaders where she was welcoming him to stop on her land.

Honor to the erudite scholar who has left his home  
To journey to Medina



He intends to visit the holy places whose radiance  
 Illuminates the earth  
 His immense knowledge will ease and enhance his pilgrimage  
 We are overjoyed  
 To welcome the caravans of this pilgrim to the Beloved one  
 Our noble, handsome brother  
 The hem of whose scholarship others cannot hope to touch.  
 He came bearing evidence of his learning  
 And the universality of his knowledge (Boyd & Mack, 1997, pp. 287/681)

Here and elsewhere Asmā'u's words elevated the status of the receiver of her poem. She, as a person of authority, delegated legitimacy and spiritual rank to the recipient. It is understood that she approved of this scholar.

The three examples underlined Nana Asmā'u's public, local and widespread, influence. Her authority was not garnered by oppression or wiles, but rather intelligence, her sense of duty to write and contribute her voice to the public discourse, and her spiritual status.

Nana Asmā'u would have remained an unknown teacher-leader were it not for the scholarly work of Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack. Their work was valuable and unprecedented. Tracing the footsteps of this incredible woman, Boyd traveled to villages and met elderly descendants of Nana Asmā'u's teachings. Nana Asmā'u's manuscripts had been saved in a goat skin bag for over a century in the home of one of her descendants (Boyd, 1989). In the 1980s, Beverly Mack joined forces with Jean Boyd and together they translated and published the collected works of Nana Asmā'u (Boyd & Mack, 1997). The information about Nana Asmā'u's life was unique in that it came from her own pen and the voices of her students and descendants. Hence, we have a rich memory of her lifetime contributions in her own voice. We know about her piety movement, the Yan Taro movement. We know how she worked to eradicate religious illiteracy, and the creative educational methods she employed. Her life was a detailed example of a devout teacher-leader. Certainly, she was not the only example in history or in

contemporary times, but she was the only one whose narrative was driven by women; herself, her researchers and her students.

### **Contemporary Teacher-Leaders**

*The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims* is a yearly report that assessed the level of influence of Muslim men and women in a variety of arenas. In 2017, the first fifty – the very most influential - included 27 religious leaders (26 men and one woman) and 23 political leaders (22 men and one woman). Religious leadership was important in the Muslim context. At number 32 is Her Majesty Queen Rania al-Abdullah of Jordan and at number 26 is Her Eminence Sheikha Munira Qubaysi. Qubaysi's educational movement is credited with "a significant historical achievement as no less than 70 ... have memorized nine canonical books of Hadith.." (p. 92). These memorizers are all women and the reason for their success is found in the groundbreaking pedagogical creativity of Sheikha Samar al-Asha. Her book, *al-Taysir fi Hifz al-Asanid [Ease in the Memorization of the Chains of Narration]* demonstrated her use of modern mnemonic devices in assisting students of Hadith to memorize vast amounts of material. She opened an institute in the old city of Damascus and began graduating modern scholars of traditional knowledge; all women (al-Asha, personal communication, 2009).

*The Muslim 500* categorized the 450 runners up into politics, culture, etc. For the purposes of this study the scholarly, preacher, and Quran recitation categories were pertinent. In the scholarly category (p. 115), there were two women (Farhat Hashmi of Pakistan and Ingrid Mattson of Canada) and seventy-five men. In the preacher category (p. 141); there were two women (Professor Dr. Tuti Alawiyah of Indonesia and Khanum Tayyaba Bukhari of Pakistan) and forty-eight men. In the Quran recitation category (p. 171), one woman (Hajjah Maria Ulfah of Indonesia) and eight men.

Farhat Hashmi led a global Quran movement out of her institution al-Huda International (Ahmad, 2013; Shaikh, 2013). Hashmi earned a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Glasgow in Scotland (Shaikh, 2013), and was rooted in traditional Islamic learning from the *Jama'at-e-Islami*<sup>4</sup> associations of her youth. Her educational organization, originally established in Pakistan and more recently in Mississauga, Canada, served hundreds of thousands of upper middle-class, educated Pakistani women world-wide (Ahmad, 2013; Shaikh, 2013). Dr. Hashmi's style of teaching, her doctorate from a western institution, and her exposure to international scholarship solidified her status as a figure of authority. Under her teachings, her students also became teacher-leaders, and her movement grew to encompass Urdu speaking women across the globe (Ahmad, 2013).

Ingrid Mattson, author of *The Story of the Quran (2008)* and numerous academic articles, is a sought-after speaker and scholar-activist in North America. Her social media imprint is vast, and her influence significant. In 2019 Ingrid Mattson received an honorable mention, meaning that she was close to being one of the fifty most influential Muslims in the world. Her lifetime accomplishments are many, and she continues to serve the Muslim community. She was the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America, and founder of the first ever Muslim chaplaincy program at Hartford Seminary (Schleifer, 2018).

We find Muslim women religious leaders throughout the world. Women like Sheikha Laila of the Qadariya order in Sabaonabe in Sudan (Cifuentes, 2008), Sheikha Safia Shahid, founder of the Muslim Women's College in the United Kingdom, and Shariffa Carlos an American convert, and popular preacher, living in Kuwait, are all working as teacher-leaders in

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<sup>4</sup> A religious, political, and social movement in British India founded by Abul Ala Maududi in 1941

their various capacities. In Senegal, women like Adja Moussoukoro, a muqaddam (one who is advanced on the spiritual path) of the Tijani Sufi order led their disciples to spiritual enlightenment (Hill, 2010). In the United States, women such as Dr. Zainab Alwani, first woman jurist of the Fiqh Council of North America, Ustadha Zaynab Ansari, local scholar and teacher at Tayseer Seminary, Dr. Rania Awad, Shafi'i fiqh scholar at Zaytuna College, and Shaykha Aisha Wazwaz, founder of Gems of Light, formed a small but growing group of traditional women teacher-leaders. Canada is home to Dr. Farhat Hashmi, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, and Ustadha Shehnaz Karim, a young woman leader who recently found her voice through various social media platforms.

Fatima Knight was a young teacher-leader, a fresh graduate of Zaytuna College (the only accredited Muslim college in the USA), when, in 2015, she flexed her first leadership muscles. Knight raised \$100,000.00 for black churches destroyed by fire and in so doing she defined charitable giving in Ramadan in a new way (Gray, 2016). Her leadership resulted in several speaking opportunities within the Muslim community and a dynamic discussion about charitable giving to non-Muslim recipients. The result of her charitable campaign was evident in the number of crowd-funding campaigns launched by Muslims in 2017 in support of Jewish, Christian, and non-religious victims of prejudice, hate and xenophobia. Her role as teacher-leader had a ripple effect on charitable giving in the Muslim community.

**Recent history.** In recent history there were teacher-leaders in a number of countries who were tasked with preserving the faith. Habiba Fathi (1997) introduced us to a little-known category of teacher-leaders called *otines* [sheikhas]. Located in Central Asia, and especially Uzbekistan, these women worked for centuries as female scholars, teachers and cultural caretakers of faith. Fathi's (1997) article was a fascinating look at the role of women teacher-

leaders in conserving the faith even in the face of Soviet policies meant to disrupt it. The *otines* safeguarded Islam and maintained tradition. They had status and were able to influence women. As laws changed and spaces once available to them were taken away, they found new spaces to teach in and continued to hold religious tradition intact. The system of training *otines* was specific and a matter for the elite. They began their learning as young girls, at twenty were allowed to begin the serious phase of their training, and at forty they began to teach. The system of *otines* preserved outlawed books, traditional knowledge, and moral authority (Fathi, 1997).

Tutin Aryanti (2013) detailed a one-hundred-year-old organization of traditional women teacher-leaders in Indonesia called the Aisyiyah Organization. Begun in 1917, it is the sister wing of the Muhammadiyah movement, opened to educate women and fight backwardness and the effects of the Dutch influence in Indonesia. The organization was credited with piety and progressive attitudes – a difficult balance in today’s charged binary environment (Aryanti, 2013).

David Kloos, in his article “The Saliency of Gender: Female Islamic Authority in Aceh, Indonesia,” presented the stories of two Muslim female leaders in Indonesia as they worked to connect themselves to a history of female teachers and affect society (Kloos, 2016).

**Global contemporary women.** Around the world Muslim women have been gathering together in piety movements, and in government sponsored campaigns to increase the numbers of female scholars of Islam.

**Syria.** Moyra Dale (2016) wrote about Houda al-Habash’s leadership and teachings and Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix directed a documentary about her work and life in 2011. The daughter of a well-known religious leader and a graduate of a rigorous Islamic studies program in Syria, she focused on Quran teaching and helped numerous young women memorize the entire Quran. She taught other classes, offered classes to foreigners who wished to learn about Islam,

and encouraged her followers to both learn English and how to effectively use the internet for missionary (dawah) purposes (Dale, 2016). One of the students presented in the documentary film “The Light in her Eyes”, was a young student of mine as well. Muna N. went to her to learn the Quran and succeeded in memorizing it in one year, and subsequently opened mosque classes in her village for upwards of 200 children. This type of learning and leadership is typical of contemporary Muslim women leaders – teaching so that the students can become teachers.

The Qubaysiyyat were a well-known, but little understood, piety movement originating in Syria. In the late 1950s the leader and namesake, Sheikha Munira al-Qubaysi, was initiated into the Khalidi - Naqshbandi order by Sheikh Ahmad Kiftaro in what seemed to be a direct move to support what was to become her uniquely female branch of the order (Imady, 2018). Kiftaro referred to her as ‘al-Shaikha Shams’ – the Leading Sun – and as ‘al-Batala’ or the heroine. (Imady, 2018). Thereafter she built a movement and a following that would reach the thousands by the early twenty-first century (Omar, 2013).

**China.** In China Muslim women were established in leadership early in their history. Women became *jingshis* [sheikhas] (Jaschok & Jingjun, 2000) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, and established Islamic educational institutions for girls during the Qing dynasty (1616-1911). The schools were called Nuxue and Nusi. These schools had different origins but similar goals; the education of women in Islamic sciences (Jaschok & Jingjun, 2000). There was also a system of women’s leadership found in more modern mosques called the *ahong* – or a committee of female elders. Their job was to address the challenges faced by the community by the Communist Party and state interventions. They gained political legitimacy and legal entitlements in their roles as community leaders (Jaschok, 2016).

**Kazan.** Kazan is a city in modern Russia, and here the *abystay*, traditional women similar to the *otin-oyi* [sheikhas] in Uzbekistan, led and taught their students (Micinski, 2016). Naila Ziganshina hosted a weekly radio show and through her formal religious education and personal accomplishments she created a sound following. Almira Adiatullina was a mosque teacher, judge, and editor in chief of a magazine. She too had formal religious education, as well as a spiritual message and the status of having completed her hajj (Micinski, 2016).

**State run.** In the last decade a number of governments turned to the education of women as religious leaders as a way to combat extremism. Morocco, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates all have state run programs that elevate the voices of women religious leaders in one way or another.

**Morocco.** In 2005 the state of Morocco began a *murshidah* [female spiritual guide] program designed to train women to become spiritual guides, preachers, scholars and any other necessary religious leadership role (Rausch 2012). Approximately fifty murshidahs graduated annually. In order to be considered for a place in the program, applicants must have had a qualifying bachelor's degree, ranked in the top percent of their class, and had half of the Quran memorized. Graduates were trained to fulfill a number of duties and assigned anywhere between five or eight mosques along with other institutions. As a result, Moroccan women served as religious leaders with a great deal of legitimacy that was provided by the state. This allowed for greater visibility, which addressed the question of "What does a religious leader look like?" and allowed for cultural change around authority (Rausch, 2016).

**Turkey.** Turkey also began a program to train state-sponsored preachers and by 2009 50% of the 1280 official religious preachers were women (Hassan, 2016). Turkey set out to remedy the social problem that women had nowhere to go for religious instruction (Hassan,

2016) when beginning their program. Today the question of confidence - “Do people trust women religious leaders?” - is answered by the legitimization provided by the directorate of religious affairs.

*United Arab Emirates.* The United Arab Emirate set up a ‘fatwa (religious rulings) hotline’ run by female religious scholars. The hotline granted opportunity to women to ask difficult and personal questions anonymously and without the mediation of a male cleric or family member. The women giving the fatwas and answering questions were women scholars of Islam and were reported to believe that this service was not something modern, but rather a revival of the early days of their faith (Ghafour, 2016). The service was so successful that the government sent women on scholarship to Morocco for training, so that they could join forces with the three who were in employment in 2016.

### **Women in Religious Leadership Summary**

Women were part of the story of religious leadership across Abrahamic faiths, historical eras and geographical boundaries. Muslim women forged their way into leadership with scholarly and spiritual acumen, and a few were remembered by name and story. In recent times there were groups of teachers who appointed themselves or were appointed by governments as keepers of the faith. All of this leadership was performed in numerous places and spaces, but today there was a new space of leadership: the World Wide Web.

### **The Internet and Religion**

Religion has been performed in churches, temples and mosques for millenniums. A mere three decades ago an entirely new space, the world wide web, became widely available, and people of global faiths immediately began to access these new spaces for religious activity.



### **Is Online a Real Space?**

Kate Argyle and Rob Shields (1996), in an attempt to understand the swiftness by which people began to experience religion on the net, asked a question in the title of their chapter, “Is there a Body in the Net?” (Argyle & Shields, 1996, p. 58). They concluded that the body lived in virtual neighborhoods, just as it lived in ‘real-time’ neighborhoods, because we had multiple ways of being. Since the internet was part of everyday life, it was also part of our social interaction, and therefore our body existed in the net. People had emotional reactions to computer mediated communication, and physical reactions to game playing (their heart may beat, they may shout or jump or throw a fist in the air).

### **Vision and Virtual Reality**

Hillis (1996) pointed out that the root of yearning for a virtual world was to be found in the western use of ‘vision’ as a metaphor for extended understanding. Prophets have visions, spiritual experiences are often described as ‘visions’, and prayer is often connected to closed eyes and ‘seeing’ Truth. Hillis (1996) argued that the idea that the mind centered meaning and then transcended itself from the body developed after the crusades (if so it may have been connected to Islamic spiritual thought, Sufism, which spoke to a concept of divine sight and the ability of a human being to contain a vision that was outside of the body) and was connected to a process that began with geometry, moved to curiosity, developed into wonder, and found *theoria* [vision and/or truth] (Hillis, 1996). Taken in the context of online religion, it was no wonder that religion found a home and adherents found rooms in this new temple of faith. Cyberspace offered a whole new vision and a new experience that existed outside of body but was nonetheless quite real and included the body (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Hillis, 1996). In this space where reality was not tangible, modernism, and its call for three-dimensional proofs of all things,

was set aside and people experienced a new reality – a virtual reality. Cobb (1998) also argued that the internet allowed people to reconnect with the unseen world, and in that respect opened up the possibility of God again.

### **Online and Offline as One**

Heidi Campbell, in a number of publications, explored the use of the internet as a medium of cultural, and especially religious culture, change. In *Exploring Religion Online: We are One in the Network*, Campbell (2005) chose the word ‘online’ over virtual when describing internet community because the word virtual implied that which was fake or unreal. She continued to explore the connection between religion and culture in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), where she went beyond online religion (experiencing religion through online sources (Young, 2004)) and religion online (information about religion (Young 2004)) and began to speak of digital religion. She presented digital religion as a framework for describing the development of religions that were practiced and lived both online and offline. This definition pointed to how digital media affected and was affected by religious practice offline. It situated the online world in the center of our lives.

Hornsby (2013) applied the theory of social organization postulated by Emile Durkheim (2008) to online environments and answered Durkheim’s question about how societies “create and sustain social solidarity by attracting people to the pleasures of group life and by controlling them to conform with societal ways of acting, thinking and feeling,” (Hornsby, 2013, p. 69) by looking at the level of integration, regulation, individuation and socialization in online community sites. These types of communities were regulated through netiquette and on-site rules about interaction as well as clear repercussions for non-adherence to the rules. They found community integration in online rituals (Hornsby mentions an online wedding), and the sharing

of gifts (Amazon has set itself up as the source of much online gift giving, making it easy to send things wrapped and with a gift card from the comfort of your computer screen). Online communities also build memories in their archives, social media outlets and shared information. Hornsby (2013) deduced that the Internet was now a third type of Durkheimian society. Neither mechanic nor organic she labeled it a cyborg society – part mechanic and part organic. In essence Hornsby (2013) claimed that we were no longer a society of ‘real’ that dabbled in virtual experiences, but that all of the internet had become intertwined with life as we live it, whether or not an individual participated online. The new society we lived in, which she termed the cyborg society, included both online and offline experiences. They were indeed one and the same (Hornsby, 2013).

Hornsby’s ideas agreed with those of Mia Lovheim and Heidi Campbell (2016) who encouraged a fourth wave of internet research that recognized the importance of studying both online and offline practices and relationships of adherents to religious groups, whether or not they personally partook of the internet in an intentional manner. Technology shaped our personal and spiritual lives (Detweiler, 2013; Hornsby, 2013; Lovheim & Campbell, 2016) and it was important for research to occur that recognized this new reality.

### **How are Religions Going Online?**

Churches are online (Campbell, 2004), as are pagan meetings, mosques and Buddhist meditations. Christians can access church at [life.church/online](http://life.church/online) where they say, “You don’t need to have all the answers. You don’t need to be perfect. You just need an internet connection. We want you to come as you are and let God work in your heart.” (<https://www.life.church/>). This was a fully online church that encouraged both online community and offline gathering and treated the internet as a church campus. There were numerous churches that embraced this idea

including, Church of the Highlands with 40,000 in weekly attendance (<https://www.churchofthehighlands.com/>), North Point Community Church with 39,000 in weekly attendance (<http://northpoint.org/>) and Saddleback church with 25,000 in weekly attendance (<https://saddleback.com/>). Life.church is the largest with 70,000 in attendance every week (Conrad, 2017). Jewish faithful can attend online synagogue at Sim Shalom ([simshalom.com](http://simshalom.com)), where one of five women rabbis offer services Monday through Friday, though attendance did not compare with the churches. The service I attended had 9 people attending online. And Muslims can visit the Virtual Mosque where they will find sermon-styled articles that encourage Muslims to live a faithful life.

### **Digital Religion**

Online religion was flourishing. Dawson and Cowen (2005) suggested that the interactive character of the internet was foundational to the mediation of religious experience in cyberspace. Ritual was performed online in the form of prayer circles, readings of sacred texts, and meditation opportunities (Helland, 2013). These rituals could only be engaged in because the internet allowed for that engagement. The very interactive nature of the internet allowed for ritual, community, and leadership.

Practitioners, regardless of religion, found online community in social media platforms, email lists, and messaging apps. Community formed online most often when faith members had been disappointed by their local faith institutions. Online communities offered a new start with new, likeminded, people (Campbell, 2010).

Pauline Hope Cheong (2013) lamented the lack of research around religious leadership and digital religion but was able to bring together studies that demonstrated that Christian and Buddhist religious leaders increased their authority by engaging online with their parishioners, as

long as they continued to engage in person. Christian evangelical pastors were especially skilled in digital religion, bringing business skills of branding to bear in the performance of their religious authority (Cheong, 2013).

### **Some Places of Engagement in Digital Religion**

Religious leadership can engage online in many ways. Joyce Meyer built her own personal website, Rabbi Kerry Chaplin began a conference call which she then put on YouTube as a podcast, and Fatima Hashmi used Facebook Live to reach over 300,000 faithful followers of her page.

**Websites.** A website was ‘built’ and thus represented something like a building or an office; a place to meet the leader. Here was where online churches, temples and mosques might be found. It was also the center of many nonprofits focused on religious development. A website usually included an ‘about’ page, content, coming events, and products (like books) for sale. Examples of websites that acted as buildings include: Seekers Hub, a Muslim run website that considered itself “The Global Islamic Seminary,” found at <http://www.seekersguidance.org>, Elevation church, a place participants could find sermons, prayer groups, and other church-like activities found at <https://elevationchurch.online/sermons/>, and The Temple Institute, an online source of art, story, and scholarship around the Holy Temple of Jerusalem found at <https://templeinstitute.org>. Church Online Platform was a website devoted to helping churches create spaces (websites) online for their churches. Their slogan was “Church Online Platform removes the barrier of technology so any church can reach people for Christ through online ministry” (Church Online Platform, nd).

**Blogs.** Blogging was a personal online journal with certain characteristics (Brain, 2019). They were normally a single page of entries, like “Hagar Lives”, a blog kept by Jamillah Karim,

one of the women in my study. They were also organized in reverse chronological order, with older posts often archived (Brain, 2019). This made the newest writing easily accessible to readers. “Equipping Godly Women” was an example of a Christian woman’s blog that posted its newest article first. The internet marketing service MIN (Muslim Influencers Network), based in London, recommended using a blog as a method of increasing influence (personal communication, 2017). Blog language was usually informal, or a stream of consciousness, unlike online articles which were written in a more formal tone.

**Newsgroups.** Popular in the nineties and early 2000s, newsgroups were places people went to discuss issues around a particular topic area. Anna Piela (2012) studied a newsgroup of Muslim women discussing Islam and found the discussion rich and surprisingly diverse in opinion. These lists were in full swing in the 1990s and were ‘the place to be’ for Muslim women with access to the internet (Piela, 2012). They are less popular today and have been replaced by messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal.

**Social media.** Social media platforms were many and varied. Each was like its own neighborhood, and entering it meant abiding by its rules and norms, meeting new people in new ways and exploring new ideas in positive and negative manners. Some scholars included blogging as a social media platform (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016), but for the purposes of this study I described blogging separately. See below for some examples of popular social media platforms.

**Facebook.** Facebook was founded in 2004 and had over 1.2 billion users 52% of whom were women (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016). It was the most popular of the social networking sites and encouraged interaction on personal pages, public figure pages, groups of varying levels of privacy, and organizational pages. Facebook live (a service that streams a live video feed from the user’s smartphone to their Facebook page) was used by the Sim Shalom synagogue to stream

their evening service and used by many Muslim leaders to stream classes, *khutbas* (sermons) and social commentary.

**Twitter.** Twitter was described as a modern town-square in the documentary *#140characters: A Documentary about Twitter* (Beasley, 2011) where people could gather and talk to each other. It was founded in 2006, and had over 115 million users in 2012, 62% of whom were women (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016). It was used by religious leaders to announce events, send out inspirational quotes, and miniature sermon-like threads. In 2015, I participated in a twitter halaqa (class) called a ‘*twalaqa*’, where I shared the tweet stage with other women teacher-leaders, and we tweeted about a pre-selected topic for about an hour.

**Instagram.** Instagram was similar to a photo album with commentary. Users posted pictures of themselves, posters, and life events. Instagram was launched in 2010 and had 1 billion users 53% of whom were women (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016). Religious leaders could use the imagery to grow a following and to spread their message. Yasmin Mogahed, an influential Muslim speaker, used Instagram to post pictures of quotes that supported her message. She posted almost every other day and had 502, 000 followers (Mogahed, 2019). Jennifer Rothschild, a Christian religious leader, used Instagram in the same way as Mogahed, posting pictures of meaningful quotes, but she also included a number of pictures of herself (Rothschild, 2019). Unlike twitter, the character count was not limited on Instagram, so though the picture was the main focus, the commentary and hashtags could be used for longer explanations. Users could also stream their talks and build ‘stories’, which were temporary photo albums.

**Snapchat.** Snapchat was a photographic conversation that was both temporary and conducive to playful filters. Users were generally under 18 and though the app had other features, it was primarily used to post moments in their lives which would eventually disappear

(they do not always disappear, but this is one of the popular features of the app). It began in 2010, and Suhaib Webb, a Muslim Imam, used Snapchat to reach teens and teach Islamic concepts in short eight-second videos (Varagur, 2016). He had 30,000 followers for his ‘snap-was’ (*fatwas* [religious rulings]) “snap-seer” (*tafsīr* [Quranic exegesis]) and Snapchat sermons (Varagur, 2016).

**WhatsApp.** WhatsApp was a messaging app that was popular amongst people who had family and friends who lived in different countries. It had 1.5 billion monthly users (Constine, 2018). Users could send messages, video, and audio. They could make phone calls and video calls. Users could create and participate in multiple threads, or groups, where likeminded people could converse and share information. This research included six weeks of a group thread that was started in order to connect Muslim women religious leaders for networking and information purposes. In my work, I used Whatsapp to organize global volunteers, communicate for free with students in other countries, and run miniature classes.

**Video and audio platforms.** Online video was used for teaching, streaming live events, and entertainment and YouTube was the most popular platform. YouTube was founded in 2005 and had one billion users in 2012 (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016). People uploaded videos that they own in one way or another and also created channels where they could collect related or favorite videos together.

HalalTube was a Muslim version of YouTube that exclusively hosted Islamic lectures, talks, khutbahs, etc. from Muslim speakers. It used content that had already been published elsewhere divided the teachings by teacher-leader and topic.

Similarly, podcasts could be streamed from various platforms, including Spotify and iTunes. There were a number of religious podcasts available for people of a variety of faiths.



From the Productive Muslim podcast in place since February 2017 on Spotify, to Good Christian Fun, which started in August 2017 also on Spotify, users could locate almost any topic they chose to listen to on a regular basis.

### **Online Religion and Women's Leadership**

The possibility for spiritual interaction resulted in an explosion of online religion. Online churches reached out to a new generation of practitioners, social media platforms included numerous expressions of religiosity, and religious leadership was going global on the world-wide web (Campbell, 2005). Interestingly the internet provided a platform that was free of preconceived cultural norms, and as such women were able to capitalize and build a voice, expand opportunities to connect and create virtual offices (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). As a society with rules and relationships (Hornsby, 2013), the internet could be used as a tool to promote certain religious practices, to disseminate information, to create spiritual relationships, and to reconfigure religious practices so that they could be practiced online in community (Campbell, 2005).

### **Christian and Jewish Women and the Option of the Internet**

Christian women who followed in the tradition of the tele-evangelist were able to access huge audiences and created a large online following through global media ministries using websites, social media, mega-churches, books, etc. Women like Joyce Meyer, Paula White-Cain, and Jennifer Rothschild were examples of success in what was once a male-dominated field. They were not presented as the wives of charismatic preachers but were themselves the preachers.

Joyce Meyer was listed as the 17<sup>th</sup> most influential person in America by Time magazine in 2005 (Time Staff, 2005). She owned a syndicated television and radio program that reached

more than 600 TV stations and 400 radio stations. She had more than 260,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, 5.85 million followers on Twitter, almost 2 million followers on Instagram and 11.6 million followers on Facebook. Paula White-Cain was Senior Pastor of New Destiny Christian Center in Orlando Florida. Her website (<https://paulawhite.org/paula.html>) said that she had impacted people in more than 120 countries using media ministries. White-Cain had 12.6 thousand followers on Twitter, over 82,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, 71,000 followers on Instagram and 3.3 million followers of her official Facebook page in November 2018. Jennifer Rothschild ran a media ministry that included an entire website devoted to her traveling workshop (<https://www.freshgroundedfaith.com/>) and her own personal website for ministry (<http://www.jenniferrothschild.com/>). She was the author of 14 books, had recorded music CDs, owned two websites, and had been a guest on a number of popular public television shows including, Good Morning America, and The Today Show. In November 2018, she had 107,500 followers on her public Facebook page, 18,900 followers on Twitter, twenty thousand followers on Instagram and 2117 subscribers on YouTube. There were many more Christian women working in the world of global media ministries. Many were working alongside minister husbands, but others had their own platforms.

Jewish women were also using the Internet to reach wider audiences, but with less pomp and flair than their Christian sisters. Rabbi Sally Priesand, first American ordained Jewish Rabbi (and second female rabbi in the history of Judaism, with the first being Regina Jonas (1902-1944) (Klapcheck, nd) did not have her own website. She had her own YouTube channel, though it had only one subscriber in November 2018, and a few videos generally available on YouTube. She did not have an Instagram page, nor a public Facebook page. Her Twitter account had only 472 followers, but she did seem to post a weekly message. Rabbi Amy

Eilberg, the first woman to be ordained as a Conservative Rabbi, had her own website but did not have her own YouTube channel. There were numerous videos of her interviews and sermon-like talks on YouTube, but she had not created her own channel. She did not have a public figure Facebook page or an Instagram page. In November 2018, her Twitter account had 374 followers, but she had not posted in six months. Kerry Chaplain, a woman Rabbi known for her interfaith work and especially her *One Prayer One* did a weekly conference call that was later posted on YouTube, and she had her own channel as well, though it had only 15 subscribers. In November, 2018, Chaplain's Twitter account was active but she had only 275 followers, her Instagram had 310 followers, and her Facebook account was a personal page, not a public one.

These three women reminded me much more of the Muslim women I studied. They were on social media and 'Googleable', but there did not seem to be much intention there. The Christian women, on the other hand, seemed to use multimedia with strategic intention and very successfully. An interesting expansion of this research would be to interview some of the Christian and Jewish women mentioned here, and others, and compare their experiences to those of the Muslim women discussed below.

### **Islam Online**

To travel around the Muslim world was to meet people who were technologically savvy and clever users of social media. Almost everyone carried a smart-phone, and most had either a Facebook or an Instagram account. In the earliest days of the development of the internet, Muslims took to email lists and newsgroups and were able to meet other Muslims from all over the world, discuss things with them and learn from each other from the comfort of their living rooms (Piela 2012). Today, with the explosion of sites and opportunities online, Muslims have begun to expect internet involvement regarding their religious learning and practice (Bunt,

2018). It is true that globally, there are plenty of Muslims who, living in dictatorship societies, do not have free and open access to everything on the internet, but it is also true that digital natives have ‘work-arounds’ for these problems. When I lived in Damascus, Syria, it was illegal to access Facebook with an IP address from Syria, but my children and all of their friends had Facebook accounts anyway. Communication apps like WhatsApp and Telegram were used so frequently that the UAE blocked the ability to make phone calls through them. Residents of the UAE may have struggled to make an international phone call, but they had full access to messaging, group threads and video and audio messages. And anecdotally, it was difficult to find anyone in the Muslim world who used the internet and did not have one of these message apps.

Gary Bunt (2018) was concerned with “how the immediacy and searchability of the internet... influences the development of Islamic religious authority online.” (Bunt, 2018, p. 7). He studied Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs), and noted a number of developments.

**Social media use.** Instagram, Facebook and Twitter were used heavily by Muslim leadership. Some of these leaders appointed volunteers to post on their behalf, but many of them posted themselves and used the platforms to spread their message. Muslims heavy use of these platforms (Bunt, 2018) meant that these leaders had a wide reach. This was evidenced by global offline invitations that were extended to the more successful users of social media. Muslim leaders used hashtags with skill and had learned that a viral hashtag was the best marketing for their ‘brand’ (Bunt, 2018). WhatsApp was used by Muslim leaders to organize amongst themselves, and by families and social groups to communicate personal ideas around religion (Bunt, 2018).

**Apps.** Muslim life is inundated with applications meant to help organize ritual and social life (Bunt, 2018). Almost every Muslim had a prayer app on his/her phone telling him/her what time the prayer began and ended and pointing them in the direction of Mecca. Then there were Quran apps that made it easy to ‘carry around the Quran’ without worrying about setting it on the floor and/or other disrespectful interactions. There were Quran apps for memorization and for *tajwīd* (perfecting pronunciation) as well. One *tajwīd* app had the learner record and send their recitation to a teacher who then responded with corrections. There were apps with special prayers, and particular *du`a* (supplications), and other apps that helped with hajj and with Ramadan. A new app called “Quran Club” gave Muslims around the world the opportunity to read Quran and send the blessing and prayer of that reading of the Quran to causes around the world. The app was new, but it hoped to be a platform for charitable and worship activities for Muslims (personal communication, 2019). Muslims have embraced the application world as creators and as users (Bunt, 2018).

**Questions and articles.** Muslim questions around family life and prayer life, as well as how to live in modern society were answered at numerous websites dedicated to this process (Bunt, 2018). Bunt (2018) discussed onIslam.net and IslamQA.info as well as a few others. We can add to these SeekersHub.org, which answered inquiries about religious rulings, but also gave general life advice to questioners; Muwatta.com, which spread information based on the Maliki *madhhab* (school of thought); Shafiifiqh.com which answered questions from the Shafi *madhhab* and Lamppostedu.org, which disseminated education via courses and articles.

### **Muslim Women Online**

The social networking of the internet created a complex system wherein women of all faiths, and in this case Muslim women, could stand up and lead with fewer of the barriers that

they faced in traditional societies and communities (Bunt, 2018; Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). Platforms became neighborhoods, and leaders became overnight influencers with thousands and even millions of ‘followers’. The speed of the internet and the changes it brought about had a powerful effect on women’s leadership (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). It opened doors and gave women increased participation and voice, shaped perceptions of leadership in new ways, and refined what was meant by power and influence (Ercetin & Bicassor, 2016). Here then was a space of leadership- the new digital society in which the mosque was no longer the only place where voices of authority were heard, a place that challenged patriarchal structures without stress or strain, a space where Muslim women could lead.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Feminism, complexity theory, and Aristotle’s theory of knowledge are the three theoretical corners I stood in while doing my research.

#### **Feminism**

Feminism is a “political movement for social change” (Harding, 1986) and a “movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” (hooks, 2015) and a “movement, and a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality.” (Devault, 1999). Feminist research implied a distinct way of approaching the world, from the standpoint of a valuing of women’s lives and concerns and work to improve women’s status in society. Excavation can and often is a research goal for feminist research. Narrating life experiences from the standpoint of a woman’s experience is also a research goal of feminist research. This research sits firmly in feminist theory as it concerns itself with excavating and narrating the lives of Muslim women religious leaders.

**Feminist theory.** Feminist theory, however, is a vast marketplace of ideas. There are many feminisms. For this research I rooted myself in the radical feminism of bell hooks, who sought to end gender oppression and included men in the movement. Bell hooks (2015) addressed one of the primary complaints from Muslims about feminism and perhaps one of the greatest failings of second wave feminism in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* when she said, “Underlying much white women’s liberationist rhetoric was the implication that men had nothing to gain by feminist movement, that its success would make them losers.” (hooks, 2015 p. 34). This feminism that hated men, or decided that men were the enemies of women, was a public relations disaster and also not a healthy place to create a movement that was based in the removal of the oppression of only one gender (hooks, 2015). The idea that men and women do better when neither suffers oppression is a fundamental concept of intersectional work and lies at the foundation of religious thought. This type of feminism helped me to open my eyes and ears when my Muslim participants claimed that feminism was disbelief, or that it was an enemy to Muslims. I heard in their words sentiments similar to those that bell hooks had expressed when she called on white feminists to make space for black women in feminist theory, and to understand that their approach would be unique.

In addition to radical feminism, I also leaned on the feminism of care of Nel Noddings. Nel Noddings (1984) built a feminist theory of “practical ethics from a feminine view” (Noddings, 1984, p. 3). She said that ethics of human encounters had been built on what many would call the “male ethic” or an approach of law and principle that had unfortunate effects on society like war and oppression. Instead she called for what she termed a “feminine view”, though it would not necessarily be the view of any particular woman and could be the view of any particular man (Nodding, 1984). Her theory was helpful as I listened to women speak of

their mission, their values, and their ethics. Her feminist theory of relation began with a longing for goodness instead of beginning with moral reasoning. Since I was studying religious leaders, this feminism was appropriate. While Noddings (1984) did speak of the feminine and masculine she was careful to say that these qualities were about valuing what society termed “feminine” and devalued, elevating it and building an ethical society on these “feminine” qualities of care (Noddings, 1984), not about what men or women might feel or do.

### **Complexity Theory**

Feminist research rejected the idea that knowledge and knowers are separate and called for us to reject positivist notions of research which declare a split between fact and value, reason and emotion (Devault, 1999). Positivist ideas are rooted in physical science and the extrapolation of scientific theories to sociological thinking. As science grew out of twentieth century views of the world, a new approach that agreed with feminist thinking grew into a new way of looking at the world.

Fritjof Capra (2002) in his book *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living* described how complexity theory changed how we saw the world. He demonstrated how it could be applied to modern social life, offering new methodologies and hope for a sustainable future. The theory was based on an understanding of life that was contained in autopoiesis and a dissipative structure. These ideas, in congruence with neuro-phenomenology, allowed for a new way to understand living systems, and by analogy, social systems, organizations and leaders (Capra, 2002).

Autopoiesis was a deep shift in the understanding of biology. It understood that living systems could create and renew themselves and that this process allowed for diversity and uniqueness (Capra, 2002).



It further understood life itself as a network, similar to digital societies, so that life was now seen as a combination of a whole instead of as represented in one single molecular component. The concept of a dissipative structure furthered the understanding of life because it moved the focus away from stability and forced it to see that open systems maintained themselves with energy and change. Instability was no longer foreign, but welcome, and order (what was originally understood to be the foundational state of life) was a “spontaneous emergence” (Capra, 2002, p. 14) that occurred at crucial points of development. These systems demonstrated a dance between chaos and order which modern computers were able to observe and present as fractals (Wheatley, 2006).

Autopoiesis and dissipative structures theory (non-linear theory) moved sociological thinking out of concrete absolutes and into fluid possibilities and change.

Complexity (or Chaos) theory taught us that all of biology lived in self-renewal and change that was rooted in an original fractal, or pattern, of existence (Capra, 2004; Wheatley, 2006). Muslim women’s lives were rife with the trauma of colonialism, post-colonial dictatorships, and oppression, yet the women themselves had come forth in leadership. Complexity theory applied to social systems helped me understand why and how that happened, “In the realm of chaos, where everything should fall apart, the strange attractor emerges, and we observe order, not chaos.” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 117).

Digital religion sat nicely here as well. The networks of life were reflected in online digital communities and cultures. Capra defined cognition as “a continual bringing forth of a world through the process of living. The interactions of a living system with its environment are cognitive interactions, and the process of living itself is a process of cognition.” (Capra, 2002, p. 36). Along with his new definition of cognition, Capra highlighted the importance of reflection

and early meditation practice. His connection to mysticism and spirituality (Capra, 2010) made his theory uniquely suited as a new and interesting lens through which to examine Muslim women's leadership of global communities in the digital world.

In the book, *Women Leaders in Chaotic Environments: Examinations of Leadership Using Complexity Theory* several authors used complexity theory to examine women's leadership during periods of chaos in history. Mentese & Çen Sahin (2016) used complexity theory to analyze the life of the earliest Muslim woman teacher-leader and Mother of the Believers, 'Aisha bint Abu Bakr. Their analysis pointed out moments of decision-making and interaction with non-linear circumstances that created a woman who was a complicated leader, embodying many traits, the most important of which was authenticity. Mentese & Çen Sahin (2016) demonstrated 'Aisha bint Abu Bakr's ability to renew and make new both in the larger society and within herself. Her autopoiesis manifested itself in her contributions to early Muslim history, and her life continued to dissipate in the very psyche of the Muslim community (Mentese & Cen Sahin, 2016).

### **Aristotle's Ways of Knowing**

The importance of knowledge in Islam cannot be exaggerated, and many early Muslim philosophers grappled with categories and definitions of knowledge. Aristotle's theories of knowledge were reflected in ibn Sina's (Avicenna) three types of knowledge, and Aristotle himself was considered the First Teacher (*al-mu'allim al-awwal*) (Ibrahim, 2014). al-Ghazzali, Ibn Rushd, and al-Farabi all discussed and interpreted Aristotle's theory of knowledge (Ibrahim, 2014) and al-Farabi was often referred to as the Second Teacher (*al-mu'allim al-thani*) right behind Aristotle. This historical cross over of culture was useful now as I looked for the essence of leadership in Muslim women's global lives.

**Epistemé.** Aristotle described five approaches to knowledge in The Nicomachean Ethics Book IV. The first was epistemé, which in modern understanding is often translated as scientific knowledge, but for Aristotle epistemé was knowledge that was eternal, universal, and did not change based on context. In Islamic knowledge, and for the purpose of this study, this would apply to the memorization of the Quran and the hadith. For early Muslim thinkers epistemé included sacred and scientific knowledge and was translated to the Arabic word, *'ilm* (Ibrahim, 2014). It would apply to knowing what early thinkers said. It would not include new thoughts or explanations about these ideas – for that we would need to use other parts of intellect and moral virtue.

For the women in this study, seeking *'ilm* – or developing their epistemé - was an important part of becoming a leader.

**Techné.** Aristotle's second way of knowing was techné, the Greek origin of today's 'technology' and in Arabic early thinkers called it *sinā'ah* [to make or produce] (Morewedge, 2014). This was knowing how to do something. It was focused on creating or doing. In the context of Islamic knowledge, we could say that fiqh is techné. Knowing how to pray, fast, go on hajj and wash for prayer are all types of information related to the doing of an action, not what someone has said about it, nor even understanding it. Knowing how to manage technology – how to create a website or a successful Facebook post – was another form of techné important in today's world of digital religion. Muslim women teacher-leaders needed strong techné in both the how-to's of religion, and the how-to's of the internet.

**Nous and sophia.** Understanding was wrapped up in both nous and sophia. Nous was intelligence or awareness (*'aql* in Arabic) (Morewedge, 2014) and sophia was the excellence of thought that comes from epistemé and nous used together (*hikmah* in Arabic) (Morewedge,

2019). *Nous* was a difficult word to understand in English, but Islamic thinking expressed in Arabic had a related concept – *ma`rifa* or *`irfan* (Morewedge, 2019), which is to come to an awareness or knowledge of a thing by the grace of God. It is a deeper understanding that does not come from book learning, but rather from a knowing that is not palpable by human measures. *Sophia*, then, was a combination of learning the Truth of things (epistemé) along with an awareness of those things, one might say a reflective consciousness, which is a term coined by Fritjof Capra (2002) to express self-awareness, in order to arrive at a type of wisdom, sometimes coined as ‘theoretical wisdom’ since it has to do with thinking about the things that we know and gaining understanding through that thought.

**Phronesis.** Phronesis was Aristotle’s attempt at explaining what happened when intellectual capacity and moral capacity combined into action. In Islamic thought as expressed in the Arabic language, this would be *ihsan*. Ibn Sina described it as ‘self-knowledge’ (Morewedge, 2019) and al-Farabi described it as discernment (al-Farabi, /2007). Al-Farabi described phronesis as, “What most people refer to by ‘intellect’ (*`aql*) and on account of which they say man is intelligent, is discernment, sometimes saying about the likes of Mu`awiya (the leader of the Umayyads) that he was intelligent, and sometimes refusing to call him intelligent by saying that the intelligent person should have religion.... By ‘intelligent person’ then, these people mean only someone who is virtuous and deliberates well when deducing any good to be preferred and any evil to be avoided.” (al-Farabi, 2007). Phronesis was the ability to know (epistemé and perhaps *techné*, and even better if it included *nous* and *sophia*.) and to deliberate based on this, knowing what was right and good based on moral values (based on religion for al-Farabi). This is a highly contextual action and so must include an amount of strategy and forward thinking. Aristotle considered political abilities and thinking abilities wrapped up in

phronesis. By political we could assume he meant leadership qualities. He also designated virtue in household management as a sign of someone with phronesis, I doubt that he intended women, but in our modern context it would be mostly women who fit this description (Nichomean Ethics, Book VI).

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

This study looked at the lived experiences of Muslim women religious leaders in digital religion. In order to contextualize their experiences, I examined scholarly literature around women in religious leadership in general, Christian and Jewish women in religious leadership, and Muslim women in religious leadership; past and present. I then looked at the work that was done around digital religion overall and then specifically Islam as practiced online.

I found that Christian, Jewish and Muslim women worked to achieve clerical authority in their respective faiths and met with varying degrees of success. Everyone was 'online' in one way or another. From Orthodox Jewish women using the internet to answer religious questions, to Pentecostal preachers becoming global media millionaires, to Muslim women answering religious questions on the telephone; women were living in digital religion.

While I found much information about Muslim women around the world in groups; the *otines*, the *Qubaisiyyāt*, the *murshidahs*, the *nusis* etc. there was very little information about the individual people behind this work. We know almost nothing about who they were or are.

Feminism rooted us in the experiences of women, and complexity theory opened our eyes to examining their lives within an understanding around renewal and change. Peripatetic ways of understanding knowledge categories, then, gave us a framework within which to understand the learning, teaching, and acting of Muslim women religious leaders.

This study, rooted in feminism, complexity theory, and peripatetic thinking, began the process of changing the historical habit of ignoring women's lives, their personal experiences, and their narratives, and dug deeply into the phenomena of the Muslim woman teacher-leader.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

This study sought to narrate the stories, describe the experiences, and understand the phenomenon of Muslim women teacher- leaders; essentially moving women's experiences in religious leadership out from the shadows and into the conscious light of research.

### Qualitative Research

A qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of research is to explain a phenomenon using human experiences (Charmaz, 2014). As outlined by Creswell (2003), a quantitative approach is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Muslim women teacher-leaders, a qualitative approach was the more appropriate choice. Qualitative research is useful in understanding the human condition (Charmaz, 2014). It is especially good at investigating complexity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2017) as it brings forth rich description and looks for the patterns in what seems to be random or chaotic life experiences. In a sense it is discovering the fractal patterns of peoples, places, and conversations. Qualitative research is especially suited for uncovering the underlying meaning of events and activities.

A positivist approach to human behavior has been challenged by researchers who either recognized the limits of seeking a single truth or became cognizant of oppressive policies that could result from research based in the experiences of one population (white middle-class men, for example) but built for another (women of any class or race) (Capra, 2002). Traditional science, for many years, supported the positivist approach to research in human behavior because it taught that slight variances converge, differences balance out and quantitative data can be used to determine a fairly accurate picture of what might happen next in a particular scenario.

Feminist researchers challenged this positivist approach especially regarding women's experiences. Assumptions about women's lives may limit the quantitative researcher's ability to see the reality for what is actually is, instead of what it is assumed to be (Harding, 1987).

### **Feminist Research**

Harding (1987) identified three hallmarks of feminist research. First, the research questions themselves were generated from the perspective of women's experiences. Those questions were not seeking a positivist 'truth', but rather to change the condition of a people (Harding, 1987). Feminists asked new questions that placed women and women's experiences at the center of inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Second, the purpose of the research was to provide an explanation of social phenomena that women needed (Harding, 1987). Third, the researcher was inserted into the study not as objective truth teller, but as subjective participant (Harding, 1987). This subjectivism reduced the effects of objectivism that hid evidence of subjectivity from the audience (Harding, 1987). Feminist epistemology argued that "... a woman's oppressed location within a society provides fuller insights into society as a whole." (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 11).

My study qualifies as feminist research: the question was generated from my own experience as teacher-leader and it sought to examine women's experiences as Muslim women religious leaders. And indeed, it is my life experience that will allow me to bracket my own subjectivism, be thoughtful and fair, and avoid the false empiricism of "objectivized" discovery (Harding, 1987).

### **Feminist Phenomenology**

My study was a phenomenology of numerous Muslim women religious leaders having addresses in the western hemisphere but living in the global village via the Internet.



Phenomenology is a methodology of qualitative research that works to capture “an awareness that is unaware of itself” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 35). More than a narrative, it takes a bird’s eye view of the subject matter at hand to understand. It is no mistake that the word phenomenon means both a “happening or experience” and a “marvel, wonder or miracle” (Oxford American Dictionary). The study of the lived experiences of people is to marvel and wonder at the experience of their lives. Phenomenology is also more than an ethnography (Van Manen, 1990). I was not only observing the ways of people but looking for meaning and connections. I was seeking the essence of their leadership.

It was a feminist phenomenology because I was studying women and began with the attitude that women can be knowers or “agents of knowledge” (Harding, 1987). I was not ‘adding women’ to previous studies, but rather refusing to trivialize women’s experiences and expecting that they participate with men as originators of human culture (Harding, 1987). The methodologies I used for the phenomenology were not distinctive for feminist research, but rather effective tools of qualitative research. The feminist engagement of the tools of research in order to uncover and discover new knowledge about what it means to be a Muslim woman teacher-leader was foundational to this work.

### **Data Collection**

I began this research with an inventory of women I knew as Muslim women teacher-leaders who were on social media. At the time, I could only count about five. I then did a precursory literature review and discovered studies about piety movements that were either led by women or intended for women to become teacher-leaders and a few studies about Muslim organizations that were women-run. These studies said little of the women who had founded

and/or directed the work. Using a feminist lens, I realized that women were being left out of their own story, so I determined to fill in the gaps.

I began to seek Muslim women teacher-leaders and I used Facebook to ask for names that I did not know. I received a list of over 100 women, some of whom I was newly reminded of, and others who did not really fit in the category I was attempting to create. I began to talk to women and ask for names from people I knew, and soon I had a vast list of individual women who were identified by others as religious teachers/leaders in one way or another.

As I expanded my search, I did some precursory interviews with Muslim women teacher-leaders across the globe. Around this time, I was added to a WhatsApp® group called “Women’s Religious Leaders Network c\*” (not the real name). The group had 75 participants, most of whom were in addition to the 100 women introduced to me through Facebook. As women began to learn that I was interested in the lives of Muslim women teacher-leaders, they began to tell me of women they knew, and send me their contact information etc. The job of choosing who to interview was made easy by the willingness of my participants but made difficult by the sheer number of teacher-leaders I was meeting. I recruited my subjects by reaching out to them personally. Everyone who responded to my message agreed immediately and enthusiastically to be part of my non-anonymous study, except for one woman who agreed to be interviewed but asked that her story be anonymous. Two women did not respond at all, and I did not follow up because by that time I had more women to study than I could conceivably manage in this project.

The WhatsApp group was another source of rich data about the phenomena related to Muslim women’s religious leadership, so I asked permission of the thread owner to include the first six weeks of the thread archive (before I was added) as an anonymous part of my research. I

added a quick survey that stood in for direct questions about demographics and internet attitudes and habits and 75 of the 75 women responded.

### **Participant Selection**

I invited my participants to participate in a non-anonymous study. Their responses alone demonstrated their courage and conviction. Each woman I studied looking for the essence of Muslim women's religious leadership could be the subject of a narrative study on her own. They were intelligent, with rich experiences and interesting backgrounds that taught me about global Muslim history, race and American history, passion and pedagogy.

The teacher-leaders in my study were working in religious teaching and leading. It occupied the majority of their lives. They were deferred to by a collection of students and had reached a level of expertise in Islamic scholarship such that they taught Islam in one way or another. I used the following methodologies in order to cast a wide net in my data collection, believing that more data would help paint the phenomena more accurately: interviews, netnography (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2013), public teaching observations, and document analysis of their publications.

### **Participant Summary**

#### **Seven Muslim Women who Lead**

I studied Dr. Zainab Alwani, the first woman to sit on the Fiqh Council of North America, Zaynab Ansari, the first female resident scholar in the USA, Dr. Jamillah Karim, scholar practitioner and author of two books about Muslim women, Shehnaz Karim, Sufi-styled leader of her local Canadian community, Kaltun Karani, a coach-leader and teacher of Islam, Ieasha Prime, scholar-activist and speaker at the Women's March in January 2017, and Halima Krausen, a qualified sheikha of the Chishti order and imam of the Hamburg mosque for twenty

years. Each of these women was a public figure with a fairly heavy online presence. They were published and seasoned teachers.

The women were from varying ethnic and racial backgrounds. They had studied in different places and came to teaching Islam from varying points of view (see Table 1). Table 1

Summary Table of Biographical Information

Name	Region living in now	Countries and regions lived in and/or studied in	Ethnic and racial background	Theological world view
Dr. Zainab Alwani	Eastern USA	Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, USA	Iraqi	Sunni, modernist
Zaynab Ansari	South Eastern USA	Southern USA, Iran, Syria	African American, Lebanese (Christian)	Sunni, traditional
Dr. Jamillah Karim	Southern USA	Southern USA, Malaysia, Senegal	African American	Sunni, Warith Deen Muhammad community, Sufi
Shehnaz Karim	Ottawa, Canada	Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal, Syria	Ugandan	Sunni traditional, Sufi leanings
Kaltun Karani	North Central USA	Somalia, UAE, Syria, USA	Somali	Sunni, modernist
Ieasha Prime	Eastern USA	USA, Egypt, Yemen	African American	Sunni traditional
Halima Krausen	Germany	England, Pakistan, Egypt	German	Sunni, Sufi

### The Thread Participants (WRLN)

I then turned to the Women's Religious Leaders Network WhatsApp thread. Here I had rich data – women's biographies, their conversations, their concerns and their descriptions of their leadership. I treated it as a feminist conversation, the questions were naturally produced by the participants, and answered by them as well. I had the enviable position of 'fly on the wall'

where I could listen and learn without intruding on the conversation. I printed out the first six weeks of the thread (before I joined; it was mailed to me by a participant) and used qualitative analysis to code and analyze the discussion. I also sent a survey to the participants in the thread so that I could ask pointed questions about their digital media use to supplement the thread of discussion. I had 100% response rate in three days (75 women from 75 members of the thread).

The 75 members of the thread were women primarily in their thirties and forties (73%). 19% were in their twenties and 8% were over 50. The majority were educated either through a traditional madrasa system or the classical ‘sitting with a teacher’ system found in non-western countries. Forty-four percent had an additional academic degree in a secular subject, and 47% had an additional academic degree in some form of Islamic studies. Forty-one percent felt they had been mentored during their training and 36% attributed said that self-study was an important part of their education.

None of the women self-identified as progressive (theologically), instead they described their school of thought as something within the fold of orthodoxy (Sunni). Fifty percent said they were traditional and followed a Sufi *tariqa* (a path of spiritual practice), while 25% said they were Sunni traditional but without a Sufi *tariqa*. Nine percent said they were Sunni traditional but were without a Sufi *tariqa* or a *madhhab* – which made me question how traditional they were, but this was how they self-reported. Only two women described themselves as following a ‘Salafi’ school, and one of them included the Hanafi school with her Salafi leanings.

### **Instruments of Study**

I used four tools to get at the essence of each woman's leadership: long feminist interviews, teacher-observations applied to public teaching, document analysis, and a netnography (analysis of the subject's social media footprint) (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2013).

#### **Feminist Interviews**

Feminist researcher Anne Oakley (1990) criticized the typical interview model as "morally indefensible" (Oakley, 1990, p. 41) – that the hierarchical model of interviewer and subject is not only patriarchal in its structure but irresponsible in its scholarship. She called for an interview model of friendship engaging both the interviewer and the interviewee in a collaboration in the joint work of discovery (Oakley, 1990). Hence, I conducted interviews modeled on conversations and shared experiences. I asked for a narrative of their lives in their own words. I was also interested in their opinions about leadership, feminisms, and the lifestyle of a Muslim woman teacher-leader. The interviews included questions about their involvement in digital culture and the reasons for the platforms they had chosen to participate in. I allowed the interviews to follow the pattern of conversation and drew upon the threads of interest and discovery that were created by congenial discussion. I took notes during the recorded interviews in order to capture my research thoughts, and I then transcribed the interviews, using a professional transcribing company and then checking their work myself, and coded for patterns and themes. The findings are in chapters four and five of this work.

Each interview began with a question that invited the participants to share their 'life-story' or how they got to be where they were on the day of the interview. More specific questions followed, but they were always guided by the comments of the participant herself. The

interview usually concluded with more personal questions related to loneliness, inviting the participant to be vulnerable and open about their leadership lives.

Interviews were conducted using either a telephone or video feed through Adobe connect. The interviews were recorded using a recording application and all interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. Most participant interviews took place in a single session, but three were revisited for points of clarification.

### **Netnography**

A netnography is an ethnography of internet use (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2013). I conducted a netnography to better understand the teacher-leaders and to examine their use of the World-Wide-Web in the performance of leadership. I used the technique to analyze the phenomenon of Muslim women teacher-leaders' leadership in social media and internet platforms. Social media comprised an online society – a “cyborg society” (Hornsby, 2013). A cyborg society was a third type of Durkhemian society, postulated by Anne Hornsby (2013). This vast society has neighborhoods - Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Tumbler, Instagram, YouTube, podcasts, websites, etc. - and each neighborhood has its own ‘citizenry’ or audience. The neighborhoods changed often, with new people moving in, and moving out depending on what was new and fresh. I looked at the leaders' footprints in these societies, how they performed leadership - if they did - in these spaces and included it in the larger analysis of the phenomenon of the lived reality of a Muslim woman teacher-leader.

### **Public Teaching Observations**

Much of the work of teacher-leaders happened in lecture format. In today's digital culture most of these lectures were uploaded to channels on YouTube or HalalTube or Vimeo or another website in order to reach a wider audience. Lectures were a common teaching tool and

as a former supervisor of teachers, I had often evaluated teacher's lectures in-class for effectiveness and impact. In this case I was looking at their public teaching, usually in the form of an open lecture given in front of a live audience and then uploaded to a video site.

Formal teacher observations look for evidence of learning objectives, methodology, and good questioning. In schooling, there is a connection between solid teaching and teacher leadership and in Muslim religious leadership there is always an element of teaching. So, I designed an observational tool for the lectures uploaded to the net. I looked for four typical teaching standards: Teacher is prepared, teacher is personable, teacher knows the content she is teaching, teacher is engaging. I watched one full-length video for each teacher-leader and then a second and sometimes a third to confirm my original findings. See Appendix (B) for the rubric.

### **Document Analysis**

I looked at the themes and topics that my participants wrote and published about. Three of them had published books in English, and one had published two books in Arabic, and another had published books in German. I only read and analyzed the English books. I analyzed their published books, articles and blogs and I also noted articles or books where they were mentioned or quoted.

### **Making Sense of the Data**

In this section I describe the early data collection period and the coding of the data once it was complete. I describe my own process of discovery and description, and how I stumbled upon patterns and themes.

I began analyzing the data early, mulling over the conversations I had had and thinking about the contributions of women teacher-leaders at the various events I was attending. I recorded my thoughts, insights, and questions and discussed my early observations with



colleagues and experts in the field (Dr. Nadwi, for example). This thinking helped me step away from any unexamined pre-conceived ideas I had had and broadened the scope of my thinking.

Towards the end of the data collection period I summarized the interviews, and reflected on what I found surprising, affirming, and/or challenging. Many of my early hunches about what it meant to be a Muslim woman religious leader were substantiated in the data and others were not.

I approached the question of Muslim women religious leadership in digital religion with an eye toward chaos theory and feminist thinking. I began thinking at the micro-level and asked questions that were very specific to each interviewee, but their answers led to a meso-level of thinking. I was then introduced to a meso-level data access point (the thread) which, upon analysis, pointed to macro level data. The data was filled with personal stories that indicated deep involvement in leadership and unique experiences of the Muslim woman religious leader. From that perspective I began coding the data.

### **Coding**

I began at the word level of coding. Using word-by-word coding I could attend to the images and meanings of the words my subjects used before attending to the content. This resulted in a new way of seeing the answers to the interview questions. I then moved into line-by-line coding. Now I was able to identify implicit and explicit issues that my subjects lived with. The line-byline coding helped me see the phrases and assertions made by my subjects in a new light, see how they connected to one another and develop strong themes across the data. I reviewed the data for in vivo coding as well, looking for symbolic markers in their comments and discussion.

I then laid out hundreds of words and phrases – color coded by participant – and looked for connections and themes. I applied the same process to the interview transcripts and the WhatsApp thread. I did not use coding for the documents or the online lectures.

### **Research Considerations**

#### **Generalizability**

The question of generalizability is usually asked regarding quantitative data and it was often assumed that qualitative research was not generalizable. Certainly, it was not generalizable in statistical-probabilistic generalizability which relied on positivist assumptions about reality. If generalizability permitted the application of findings from one study to another, however, it was inconceivable to erase this possibility for all qualitative data. Of course, if generalizability is used as the “hegemonic use of generalizability as universality and sameness, deployed to deny and smother difference,” (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008) then qualitative data could do without it. However, intersectional generalizability (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008) also termed provocative generalizability (Smith, 2018) helped readers rethink their assumptions and begin to imagine that which was not yet practiced nor in view (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008). When research dug deeply into human experience and behavior, intersectional generalizability told us that it can, over time, track a pattern of behavior in order to develop theories about the “arteries of oppression and colonialism” (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008, p. 174). This type of generalizability was important for researchers who sought to “contribute to social transformation” (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008, p. 174) and was important for my research. There is a sensitivity here to the slippery slope and seductive pull of sameness, while being open to similarity in human experience (Fine, Tuck & Zellerman, 2008).

Qualitative studies were focused on the particularizations instead of the generalizations of the research (Stake, 1995). As such they were focused on getting to know the case study, or the phenomenon, very well as opposed to discovering how it was the same or different than other cases or phenomena. In this way, the generalizability of this feminist phenomenology is intersectional in attitude; open to being part of the larger effort at tracking the effects of oppression and colonialism on Muslim women, while at the same time focused on the phenomenon at hand, their leadership.

### **Validity**

I am an insider in this research and as such my own experiences contributed to the perspective and bias with which I began the study.

Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), in her book *Becoming an EX: The Process of Role Exit* looked at why people leave the roles they had chosen for themselves. Her original study was an examination of nuns who had chosen to exit that role. Ebaugh was a nun, so she did her research as an insider; she then left and became one of her statistics, and so analyzed as an outsider. Her study was like mine in that she conducted long interviews and was given access to the nuns because she herself was a nun. I conducted long interviews and gained access to all of my participants because I am myself a religious leader. Though her study was interested in how women “unbecome”, it was related to mine because it gave voice to women’s unusual experiences, and was the mirror of mine, which asked how women ‘become’ and live as religious leaders. Her original study was also meant to be a microcosm of rapid social change, and indeed, my study of the emergence and maintaining of leadership amongst Muslim women is also a microcosm of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In order to account for possible bias, I spent time writing my assumptions and discussing them with colleagues and mentors. The addition of the WhatsApp thread and the consequential access to 75 women working in the field I was studying helped me to expand the data in ways I had not foreseen possible. I triangulated the data across multiple fronts and stayed connected to the literature around digital religion, leadership, women in religious leadership, and Muslim women and questions of authority. The circling between the data, the literature, and my own experiences provided a rich foundation of triangulation for validation of the data, which then allowed for the intersectional generalization described above.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The seven main participants in the study were voluntary and gave informed consent to a non-anonymous study. The published works and online accounts that I accessed were open to public consumption. WhatsApp is a communication application used by 1 billion people around the world. It is owned by Facebook, and as such stands somewhere in the middle of opensource information and private conversations. When messages are sent in private chats they are encrypted and cannot be accessed even by a court order. As such there is a sense of ‘safety’ when communicating on WhatsApp. In group chats, however, it is only as private as the people on the thread. Threads can also be hacked, if and when a link is made available. Since the WRLN was a group chat, I sought permission from the founder to analyze the first six weeks of the chat. I guaranteed full anonymity – of the individuals and the group itself. She readily granted permission.

In order to ensure an ethical study, I followed the following protocol:

- I orally explained the purpose of my study and the extent of the commitment of each participant, and then followed up with a consent form to sign that further explained the

purpose of my study and the extent of their commitment. The study was a non-anonymous study, so I did not guarantee anonymity. Each participant readily agreed to be named in the study.

- Named participants signed a letter of agreement that outlined the confidentiality guidelines, the process of removing themselves from the study if they so wished, and the risks involved in a non-anonymous study.
- I stored my data in my home office, where I am the only one with access.
- Some data was transcribed by a professional transcription service, which guaranteed security and privacy. The files were encrypted, and access time was limited to work time specifically.

### **Research Methods Summary**

This feminist phenomenology is a qualitative study of the lived experiences of Muslim women religious leaders. I studied the lives of seven women using interviews, netnography, document analysis, and public teaching observations. I also reviewed a six-week online conversation of 75 leaders. The data collection period was spread over a ten-month period during which time the data analysis began. At the end of the collection period, I began to code and do a deep dive into the data at which point I followed the steps to reach an understanding of the phenomenon. Considerations for the validity and ethics of the study were followed as outlined by the internal review board at the University of St. Thomas.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

I studied seven women who were well known in Muslim communities as teacher-leaders. They each had a reputation for leadership and were invited to speak at local, national and international events. They were enthusiastic participants, ready to contribute in any way to research that would help to uplift women's voices. They all readily agreed to a non-anonymous study, which was necessary since they were all public figures and it would be impossible to both hide certain aspects of their lives and understand the phenomena of their leadership at the same time. For the seven women who I studied, I interviewed them, studied their online footprint, read their publications, and analyzed their public teaching.

During the interview, I asked each one a number of questions, and though I used a feminist interview style, and therefore did not hold myself to my original written-out questions, each interview revolved around the same basic categories of questions: (a) Becoming a leader, (b) living leadership, (c) feminism and misogyny, (d) living in digital culture, and (e) loneliness (See Appendix B for a list of the actual questions).

I also examined the online footprint of each teacher-leader, making note of its size and shape. I was interested in where they could be found online and in what capacity. I also noted their posting habits on Facebook for the month of November. I chose November because it was an election month in the United States, and I wondered if that would be reflected in their posts.

I studied much of their published work, reading their books and major articles. I looked at the trajectory of their writing, taking seriously everything that they wrote, whether blog or book.

Finally, I also observed their public teaching, either in an online video or a recorded live presentation at a national conference. I created a rubric for these observations based on previous work that I had done in teacher training and public speaking (See Appendix B).

Also in this chapter, I included the findings from my online ethnographic observation of the Women in Religious Leadership Network (WRLN) WhatsApp chat. I reported on the conversations of 75 Muslim women teacher-leaders conducted over a six-week period on the WRLN thread. Included in this online ethnography is a survey that stood in for direct questions about digital habits and demographics.

### **Biographical & Educational Backgrounds**

#### **Zaynab Ansari**

Zaynab Ansari grew up in Atlanta – a child of a racially mixed marriage. She was a precocious child who knew the names of all the oriental rugs her father sold in his downstairs shop at 4 years old. She said regarding this stage of her life, “My mom and dad have all these stories about me coming down and charming the customers and naming all the rugs and imitating my dad. Because he would sell the rugs and I would listen to him, and I knew all the names of the carpets, so ... So, I guess you could say at an early age I kind of had that exposure to some aspect of Islamic art and civilization there with the oriental rugs.”

Zaynab Ansari’s convert parents were proactive regarding her education. They taught her and her sister how to read English and Arabic at home and taught them some chapters of the Quran as well. “I have really early memories of my mom trying to find a good schooling situation for me and my sister... We learned how to read and write well before we went to school. They both taught us how to recite some basic *suras* [chapters of the Quran] and how to read Arabic and how to pronounce the letters.” Her parents continued their push toward Islamic

education and traveled overseas to find better opportunities for learning. “We ended up in Iran because my mom and dad had made friends with a lot of the Iranians who were college students in the U.S. And they'd gone back to Iran. They invited us... We had more instruction in tajwīd and Quran. A first introduction, a really good introduction to Arabic grammar. Persians are very good at Arabic grammar. Historically they always have been.”

After five years in Iran Ansari's family moved to Damascus, Syria so that she and her sister could continue their studies. Ansari said about her experience in Damascus, “If I would attribute ... I mean, in terms of what I'm doing today and where I am today, ... it's because we went to Damascus. I mean, it was just so life-changing and so eye-opening to be in a place like Syria and see the women there. The knowledge and the professionalism and the accomplishments. And very, very unlike any other group of Muslim women that I've encountered, and I've traveled all over and met so many different women. And not to take away from the accomplishments of any other group. But I really feel like the Syrian ... the women scholars in Syria are just really *mashallah* [as God willed it], they're in a class of their own.” During her years in Syria she completed a secondary degree in *shari`a* (Islamic law) at the Abu Nur institute and also attended private classes where she was able to learn in a more traditional manner.

She returned to the United States in her early twenties and completed an undergraduate degree with a double major in History and Middle Eastern studies. She also completed the coursework for a master's degree in world history.

Having lived and studied overseas gave Ansari clout and status in the community. People reached out to her to learn and she obliged, “They said, ‘Look, you've been in Damascus. You've studied. We want to learn. There aren't that many opportunities. We cannot travel. You



have to do something.' That's really kind of how it started.” She was also called upon to answer questions online at Sunni Path and her name became known as a result of the answers she was giving.

She became the first female resident scholar in the USA and possibly globally, (depending on how we define resident scholar) when she was hired by the Tayseer seminary in Knoxville, Tennessee for that role. She then gained national attention when she published an article in Muslim Matters criticizing uncouth relationships between male religious leaders and their female followers. Ansari was also invited to be part of a national effort to unite Muslim religious scholars and attended the annual meeting both times that women were invited.

Ansari married and had three children. Her eldest son has autism and she has become a voice for mothers of children with disabilities. In 2015 Zaynab Ansari’s husband was killed in a hit-and-run motorcycle accident. This was a terrible blow and she spent many months grieving and recovering from this tragedy.

In 2018, Ansari was still working as a resident scholar, teaching, and speaking globally about Islam and modern issues.

### **Zainab Alwani**

Dr. Alwani was born in Baghdad in 1962. Her father was a well-known religious leader, who was jailed and exiled for his writings and political dissidence. Remembering her early years, Alwani said, “We were raised at that time by my grandparents from my mother's side...My grandfather, my father's family also, were neighbors. Everyone was there. We found that support system, but my childhood also was beautiful from one side with being with my aunts, uncles, kind and gentle grandfather and grandmothers, of course. Still, I remember going to school. This principal or something - the government school supervisor - she would take me

out of class, checking and asking about my father. If he had sent any letters, any gifts from him etc... They were looking for him, of course, for years.” Her father began communicating with the family by sending them books and gifts for educational accomplishments. When she was in middle school the family moved to be together in Egypt. She remembered the move, “Moving to Egypt, to Cairo itself, was a different experience. Going to school. And also... The first year, really, we met him, that was the beginning. To begin a new relationship with him after a while. He started teaching us. After *fajr* [morning prayer], he would take us to the mosque. Although, at that time, if you remember, women were not ... They do have balcony or something for women, but you can't find many people there, especially women. Except the old ladies. He would take us anyway...” they would return home and discuss what they had heard and learned, and Alwani said, “I can say, with all confidence, it impacted the three of us.” Her father was deeply concerned about their Islamic education and thinking. He would make sure that his children knew how to lead prayers and discuss difficult legal questions.

Then the family moved to Saudi Arabia. So, Alwani had gone from a small village in Iraq, to a noisy Egyptian city, and now to Saudi Arabia. She said, “There was, of course, a huge awful difference between all of them.” Egypt was an open society and with her father’s encouragement she had been in school clubs, recited the Quran publicly, and felt ready to start teaching Islam. Saudi Arabia was a completely different environment. She faced young Saudi women who said, to her, “Do you think yourself that you know religion more than us? You just came from Egypt. We know Islam better than you (because they were Saudi) ... So, keep quiet, don’t make that you know everything (sic).” But she persisted and gathered young women together to discuss issues and learn together.

She began university while in Saudi Arabia at the Sharia school but was only able to do so after receiving special permission because at the time women were not students. She did one year as an off-campus student, where she would study on her own and then take exams. She then married and returned to Iraq. She lived there for eight years unable to see her parents because of the Iran-Iraq war and unable to register at university because of her father's dissidence. Her husband had been drafted into the army, so Alwani faced great difficulty. She said, "My husband was drafted, and he was in the battlefield. You never knew if he would come back or not. I had two children at that time and the third one came later. All kinds of difficulty I was facing, but my relationship with the Quran." The Quran sustained her as did self-study. "My father encouraged me all the time to study and continue to write." She began by reading 50 books while thinking about what she might write about. She eventually settled on a topic, which she wrote out long hand, and this was the beginning of her scholarly career.

Then in 1990 she was finally able to travel, so she and her family came to the USA to visit her father, who had moved to the USA some years earlier. While she was visiting, the Gulf war began and so she remained in the USA. She was a young mother, did not speak English, and was in a foreign country and culture. She and her husband and three children lived in the basement of her father's house. Her husband worked 12-hour days in order to make enough money to survive, while she taught the neighborhood children Arabic and Quran from home. She also enrolled in English classes.

Then she embarked on a mission to complete her university degree. She completed two years at a local community college in psychology, and then went to Sudan to complete an undergraduate degree in Islamic law. She then went to the Islamic University of Malaysia and completed a master's and PhD in Islamic law and Jurisprudence.

While living in the USA, she worked as a researcher with her father and taught *halaqas* (learning circles, and community classes). During this time, she noted a disturbing pattern of domestic violence in Muslim families. Determined to affect change, Alwani worked with a local psychologist and wrote a book addressed to social workers, schools, and teachers. Her role was a scholarly role. She became the first woman to sit on the Fiqh Council of North America and she was elected the Vice Chairman of the council in 2011.

She had a long career working with institutions and establishing her own organizations. She sat on the boards of many national organizations including but not limited to, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, and the American Academy of Religion. She was a professor of religion at Howard University and editor in chief of the *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* a journal of the American Islamic seminary association. She was invited as a speaker to national and international conferences and was part of a nation-wide leadership network, the meetings of which she attended two years in a row.

Dr. Alwani is married, a mother of four, and grandmother of six.

### **Jamillah Karim**

Jamillah Karim was born in 1975 and grew up in Atlanta, a child of parents who had joined the Nation of Islam. Her grandparents were intellectuals who participated in the Civil Rights movement of the mid twentieth century. Her grandparents' living room was used as one of the settings in the modern movie "Hidden Figures," and sitting in that living room was a picture of her grandmother, Lena Horne, and Dr. King. In fact, it was in their house that the famous meeting of the minds occurred after the Birmingham Church bombing of September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

J. Karim was a highly intelligent child who attended the first Sr. Clara Muhammad school in Atlanta and was in the second class ever to graduate. She described her education this way, “At the Sister Clara Mohammed School, as much as the Quran and the Sira were emphasized, African-American literature was as well. So, I grew up reading the work, especially by high school, reading the works of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou and James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, you know, others - I later learned, even my African-American cohorts [at university], that many of them hadn't even read that literature so they would take the African-American lit courses in college.” The education at the Muhammad school was focused on undoing the master narrative of white supremacy, so she read the Quran and she read great African American writers.

Jamillah Karim went to Duke University in Indiana with an academic scholarship in order to study electrical engineering. She completed the engineering course, but while at Duke became interested in the scholarly pursuit of Islamic studies. She added a second major, religion, to her original engineering program, graduated and went on to pursue a doctorate in Islamic studies from Duke. She commented about the graciousness of some of the professors and students in the religious studies department and said, “So that's how I ended up double majoring in religion, where all my religion courses were Islamic studies. That's how, by the time of my senior year I figured out ... maybe in the end of junior, that I didn't really want to pursue engineering. I would complete the degree, because I had taken so many courses, but if I was going to go on and apply to graduate school (it would be) in Islamic studies and of course I had to.” She completed her doctorate at Duke University in Islamic Studies.

J. Karim then taught at Spelman and received tenure. Soon after she made the radical decision to leave Spelman and pursue her research goals and community activism without an

institution. She said, “So we were in Malaysia at this point, when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, if I was going to leave or not. But you know the whole - I'm still the one doing most of the chores and cooking, so ... and then I had that, I had the background of women in the Nation of Islam, they always encouraged that. To this day, all of them will tell me, ‘Oh, that's so great. You did the right thing.’” Karim continued to work in the field of Muslim women teacher-leaders however, and she went on to publish two books, numerous articles, and became a popular speaker at national conventions and conferences.

One week before her fortieth birthday, Jamillah Karim became a *murīda* [follower and student] of Shaykh Hassan Cisse<sup>5</sup> who was succeeded by his brother Imam Shaykh Tijani Cisse upon his death in 2008.

Jamillah Karim is married and has two children. Her husband took a second wife with Jamillah’s knowledge and blessing. She was public about what that meant for her and outspoken about relationships and what she called ‘radical love’ and what that meant for the wider community.

### **Shehnaz Karim**

Born in Vancouver, Canada to Ugandan immigrant parents, S. Karim remembered her childhood as a time when her father was getting re-acquainted with his faith and she was gently learning by his side. She said, “My dad was starting to discover Islam at the age of 40, which is when I was born, so he was learning about Islam, and then teaching me as he learned. It was a really organic process. It was really gentle and exactly the pace, I guess that a child would

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<sup>5</sup> Shaykh Hassan Cisse was an Islamic scholar and activist of great repute. He established the African American Islamic Institute, which soon became known for its humanitarian and educational work. He was globally renowned, and 2 million people attended his funeral in Senegal in 2008.

appreciate.” S. Karim’s Islamic learning continued in local classes and camps and at eighteen years old she decided to start wearing *hijab* [modest clothing that included a headscarf].

In college, S. Karim, a brilliant student, became enamored with philosophy. She was skilled at logic and rhetoric and could argue any side of any issue. Eventually this skill began to wear away at her faith, as she wondered if nothing were True and all things were only a matter of perspective and argument. She joined anarchist friends and began working in activism. She worked feverishly, but at the end of an anti-globalization campaign that came to an uneventful end, she hit a place of near despair. The overwhelming feeling that nothing one did ever resulted in anything combined with her deep questions about faith and catapulted her into a self-described crisis. During this time, she was invited to a party where one of the young women waxed excitedly about her sister’s experience in Syria. S. Karim’s interest was piqued, and she began to think of it as a solution or at least an escape from the internal situation she was in. “Anyway, at that point, I was like, ‘Okay, I’m going to have to figure out a way to really be serious about getting out of here, so that my parents don’t take me to like a psychiatrist or something and just tell them that I’m depressed,’ I was like ‘That’s what they’re going to think it is and I feel like that’s not really what this, it’s just because I don’t have any answers to how to live life,’ So I told my parents that I want to travel.”

S. Karim went to Syria, registered in the University of Damascus’ Arabic program for foreigners, and got involved with the “women teachers of Damascus<sup>6</sup>.” It was during her time studying in Damascus that she began to see herself as a leader. “I think as soon as I started to hear that message from (my teacher) that it was clear to me that that’s what one has to do. I

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<sup>6</sup> The Qubaisiyyat, read about their movement here: (<https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1313> )

remember (her) talking once ... and she said that 'Islam is like a sick man. You can imagine if Islam was a person, it looks like a sick body and he's got all these wounds. He's got all these broken parts and...' I just remember that so well, I remember that image so distinctly. I remember feeling so moved and so saddened by that and so in agreement and so appreciative that she was not pretending that it was otherwise. I understood from that talk that it's up to us to care about this and to change the health of this body.' S. Karim began to see herself as appointed to care for the body of Islam.

She eventually returned to Vancouver, completed an undergraduate degree in education and began to teach in the Canadian public school system while also teaching in Islamic schools. She completed a master's in public administration and worked in the field for a few years. She also worked as a leadership consultant for teens in the United Arab Emirates, where she was exposed to young people finding their own solutions to issues of cooperation and leadership.

She married a young man with similar sensibilities and together they began an organization called Sanad Collective, which became an important Islamic institution in Canada. She and her husband share teaching responsibilities and she is the official national executive director of the non-profit organization. In 2018, they had been married for 13 years and had no children.

### **Halima Krausen**

Halima Krausen was born in Germany to Christian parents and sometime around 1960, when she was a mere child of 11, she chose Islam as her religion. She said, "My family is Catholic on my father's side, Protestant on my mother's side. My father converted to Protestantism in order to get married to my mom, and my mom had in mind to bring us up Protestant... There was a lot of tension between the two sides of the family ... and I noticed



pretty soon in my life that there was something wrong.” This tension between family members bothered her young mind and she told me that she would think, “Yeah, because if people go, and they pray, and they do good actions, and they are moral and like that, then they think that the others will go to hell just because they belong to the wrong club, then there must be something wrong, so the point was, where was it wrong?”

At four years old Halima Krausen could read and write and she began to do just that, “My mother's father was a Protestant minister, and he had loads of books, theological books that I didn't understand...but I wanted to know everything exactly.” She continued her path of reading until when she was eight years old, when she read the Christian Bible. She said, “When I was eight, I read the Christian Bible from the beginning, from the creation of the world all the way through to John's Revelation, including the boring parts because it could be that between the boring parts, there was something that was essential, and in fact, in between all these boring parts, there was that you're only supposed to eat certain animals, and I got into trouble with my mother because I didn't want to eat the pork roast.” She began to read about other religions when she was nine years old until she read “If you believe in one God, and you believe in all different messengers, then by definition, you are a Muslim. Shock!” She was thrown and a bit devastated. Islam was not a popular religion in Germany at the time. It was “mostly medieval suspicion,” she said when talking about the difficulty she was in. She began to pray and read and think and worry – until she said to herself, “Then it's probably that.”

Krausen tells how, after reading that the process of conversion needed two witnesses, she grabbed a couple of schoolgirl friends and said to them, “Listen, I have to tell you something.” She was yet to meet Muslims as a community but reached out to an Egyptian worker at her father's company and asked him to teach her the Arabic alphabet. She did not tell her parents,

but her mother read her diary and was very upset. She moved out of the house as early as possible and started working.

She enrolled in her local university and began to sit with other Muslim students from around the world. The discussion at the time was around questions of legal permissibility, and though Krausen did not enjoy these nitpicking topics, she was fascinated by the multiple cultures and peoples of the Muslim world, so she continued to attend. She sat and studied with some of the most important scholars of her day, including Said Ramadan<sup>7</sup>, the son-in-law of Hassan al-Banna<sup>8</sup>, and Muhammad Hamidullah<sup>9</sup> one of the most learned scholars of the twentieth century.

Krausen then began to travel the Muslim world. She studied at al-Azhar and was at the time the only woman in the theological department. She married and continued to travel and learn with her husband, continuing at al-Azhar and studying in Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. In 1986 she became the student and right hand ‘wo’man of a local imam. During those years she would counsel and lead the mosque members so that when her teacher retired, and handed the mantle of leadership to her, she became the imam of the German-speaking community without any public fuss. She said, “I was the imam of the German -speaking community for 20 years and nobody noticed.”

In 2014, she was given the official title of sheikha – as the term is used in Sufi circles- meaning one who carries the mantle of the *tariqa* [path of spiritual learning - order]. This title was granted for her intellectual contributions, community work, and spiritual association with the Sufi order Naqishbandi-Chisti. Her teacher said to her in a home ceremony recorded and posted

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<sup>7</sup> Said Ramadan was the de-facto ambassador of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s. He was an intellectual and an activist, building mosques and think-tanks in Paris and Munich. He died in 1995 and was buried next to Hassan al-Banna.

<sup>8</sup> The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>9</sup> Hamidullah had both a D.Phil and a D.Lit (two doctorates), and was a Muhaddith (scholar of hadith) and a faqih (scholar of Islamic law). He authored 250 books and was fluent in 22 languages.

on line, “As far as Halima is concerned, she has been with me since 1960... Very noble lady, very supportive and she has revolutionized the Islamic movement in Germany, and in many other parts, (she has) presented a very noble figure. In this respect I will do the reading of the Quran. {In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the most Merciful, Read in the name of your Lord, who has created all that exists. He has created men from a clot, a piece of thick, coagulated blood. Read, and your Lord is the most bountiful, Who has taught the writing by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not.} So, today's [ceremony] - The One Who has taught the writing by the pen. Who has taught men, in other words, by the pen, and through the power of our speech, and writing... Halima has forwarded the idea of Islam, the faith and its philosophy, and I think from my point of view, as she is a part of the spiritual orders and my order representing all four tariqas... She deserves something from us, and in that respect, I have brought a noble pen for her, which will be a pen for pursuing the authority, and bestow on her officially the title of sheikha. Now she will be known as Sheikha Halima Krausen. She can use her titles as a *silsila* [chain], Naqishbandiyya [of the Naqishbandi way], *mujtahida* [creating religious rulings], or she can be just a teacher of Islam. So, by the grace of Allah, I will give this and put this white shawl on her.” (IICSC, 2014). This simple ceremony underplayed the enormity of the role she was given. She was now officially a murshida, who could guide the faithful along the Sufi path of the Naqishbandi-Chishti tariqa.

After twenty years of service as Imam, she stepped down in order to pursue academic interests at the University of Hamburg where she was now an instructor.

Her husband died in 2016 and she does not have children.

**Ieasha Prime**

Ieasha Prime was born in Jacksonville, Florida to Christian parents. She attended high school at the Duke Ellington School of Art in Washington DC with a major in theater. Ellington was a unique educational environment, “They literally started training us at about 15 to basically lead workshops and to teach those who were coming in as summer youth employees. So that was kind of the beginning of me teaching, learning how to teach.” Prime’s teaching skills helped her when she later went to Egypt to study the Quran and Arabic, and taught English in order to support herself and her son.

Prime began studying Islam overseas as a youth ambassador in Senegal and Morocco. She said about her experiences there, “Both of those places have... very spiritual roots.” (ImanWire, 2018). Later, upon her return to the USA, she continued to study with a local teacher. When she was 20 years old, she was frustrated by the lack of opportunities in the USA, so she offered to chaperone a summer program in Egypt in order to study Quran and Arabic. She went with the children and studied in class with them. But it was not enough. She had a voracious appetite for learning. She returned to the USA and began studying Quran with a local teacher and when that teacher announced that she was returning to Egypt, Ieasha decided to follow her.

She went to Egypt and learned Arabic and Quran, then began studying hadith with the students of Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller<sup>10</sup>. Eventually Sheikh Nuh came to Egypt and planned a visit to the gravesite of Imam Shafi`i (one of the founders of the four major legal schools in Islamic thought). Ieasha was invited. Visiting the graves is frowned upon by literalist/modernist Muslims, and in the nineties much general education about Islam was based in

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<sup>10</sup> an influential Sunni, Sufi, scholar located in Jordan.

literalist/modernist interpretations, so Ieasha had been influenced by these teachings. She said, “And so he came and while he was there he actually asked me.. we were going to go on a *ziyara* [intentional visit to a gravesite] to visit Imam Shafi, and at that time my teacher had been very careful easing me into the *tazkiya / tasawwuf* [Sufism] conversation,... and so when we were on the *ziyara* I had a thousand questions and when it was over he asked me if I had any questions, and I said, “Boy do I’ and so (I asked them) ... one after another and he and his wife very gently and patiently answered all of my questions.” (ImanWire, 2018). This was a turning point in the Islamic education of Ieasha. Soon after that she saw a video of Habib Omar, a teacher in Yemen and she said, “Ok, how do I get there?” (ImanWire, 2018). She went to Yemen, registered in an Islamic institute called Dar al-Zahra and also learned privately with other teachers. While in Yemen she continued her hadith studies with Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller as well.

She went back and forth from Egypt, Yemen, and the USA for about ten years and during this time she began to teach a learning circle of women in Egypt and completed exams in Yemen.

She later started her second nonprofit called Barakah Inc, whose goal was to teach and educate women and youth about Islam. She was the executive director of Barakah Inc, and she was also the director of women’s programming at Dar al-Hijrah in Washington DC.

She is re-married and has three children, one adult child and two younger children.

### **Kaltun Karani**

Kaltun Karani was born in Dubai, UAE, and then moved to Damascus, Syria where she attended elementary school. Her family moved from Somalia to the United Arab Emirates because, “My mom’s family felt there were better educational opportunities in the Gulf,” but non-local students could not attend university at that time, so Kaltun moved with her brothers to

Syria so that her elder brothers could attend university in Damascus, while she registered in a local private elementary school. She said about her elementary education “I went to Dohat al-Majd (a private elementary school in Damascus) where we learned Arabic and that was the greatest blessing.”

While she was in Syria, her father died and the family was split between Dubai and Syria, but “At 13, my mother got a lottery green card to come to America.” And she moved to Ohio.

In Syria, Karani had done well in school and made friends with her 100% Syrian classmates. She learned to speak the Syrian dialect and spoke lovingly about their interest in her skin color. In the United States, however, Karani faced prejudiced attitudes from her school counselor who directly discouraged her from attending university. She spoke about this experience, “I went to my counselor and I said, ‘I hear everybody talking about SATs, is it something I should be worried about?’ He said to me, ‘No, you're gonna go to the college,’ and I thought, ‘Yeah like my brother goes to the college, I need to go to college too.’ But I didn't know the difference [between community college and university]. He just gave me a ceiling.” Karani first went to a local community college and completed a degree in computer graphics. She then went on to college to study accounting. During these years she went back to high-school to help with the Somali students there and met her counselor who expressed obvious surprise that she was at the university. “I went back to him ... I was doing accounting at Ohio State, and I went back to him because I was leading the Somali Students Association, and I said to him... I wanted to connect with the young Somali kids in the school. So I told him, ‘I'm at Ohio State, I'm at Fishier College of Business, and I'm doing accounting.’ He called everybody in the office, he says, ‘Can you believe Kaltun went there?’ And I was just thinking like what? What is so surprising about that?” Karani was very frustrated by his obvious disbelief, and it was these

experiences that encouraged her to go back to school and study for her educational license in school counseling.

Her negative high school experience was coupled with a childhood of fear messaging in religious classes. When she was 23 years old, she discovered a new way to understand religion – one of love and full intellectual engagement. She had stumbled upon a popular program that provided weekend seminars in her locality and she became, in her words, an ‘addict’ to classes. She said, “So *alhamdulillah*, that was like a turning point. And then I just became an addict, like I could not stop taking classes, my life slowly changed without me intending to change it - it just happened. My friend paid for that class because I dropped them at the door and said I'm not going in. And she said I'm paying for it, and I was like well now Kaltun you have no more excuses. So, I never intended it, it just happened. And it was ... I appreciated how knowledge was just changing me. *Alhamdulillah* [all praise and thanks to God].” She continued to take classes through the alMaghrib program until in 2016 she graduated with a second BA degree in Islamic studies. This degree, though not accredited, gave her clout and legitimacy in her community and allowed her to open a teaching institute for teens.

She was teaching at her Hikmah academy for teen girls, at a weekly halaqa for women, and she spoke locally. She expanded her reach in 2018 and began to speak at national conferences.

She also acted as a coach and mentor to a number of women. She styled much of her leadership around a coaching model, utilizing her counseling education and her religious education to influence her students and followers.

Kaltun is married and has two young children.

Table 2

*Educational Background*

<b>Educational Background</b>				
<b>Leader</b>	<b>Childhood</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Islamic</b>	<b>Languages</b>
<b>Zaynab Ansari</b>	<b>Home tutoring, local Islamic school,</b>	<b>BA: History and Middle Eastern Studies MA: History (incomplete)</b>	<b>Iran – Arabic grammar and Quran recitation Syria – Secondary Shariah degree &amp; Classical training</b>	<b>English Arabic Farsi</b>
<b>Zainab Alwani</b>	<b>Elementary school in Fallujah, Iraq Middle School in Cairo, Egypt, High School in Saudi Arabia</b>	<b>BA Islamic Law University of Sudan MA and PhD Islamic law – Islamic University of Malaysia</b>	<b>Independent study and directed study with her father Sheikh Taha Jabir al-Alwani &amp; Academic</b>	<b>English Arabic</b>
<b>Jamillah Karim</b>	<b>Elementary – high school at the private Sister Clara Mohammad school in Atlanta</b>	<b>BS: Electrical engineering and BA in Islamic studies from Duke University MA and PhD in Islamic Studies from Duke University</b>	<b>Traditional learning from the Warith Deen Muhammad movement &amp; The Tijanni tariqa</b>	<b>English Liturgical - Arabic</b>
<b>Shehnaz Karim</b>	<b>Public schooling, Home religious education</b>	<b>BA in education MA in public administration</b>	<b>Classical training in Syria</b>	<b>Arabic English French</b>
<b>Halima Krausen</b>	<b>Public schooling Self-educated with voracious</b>	<b>Incomplete from Hamburg university</b>	<b>Al-Azhar, Classical training with</b>	<b>English German</b>



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	<b>and precocious reading</b>		<b>prominent teachers, Direct teaching in the Chisti tariqah</b>	
<b>Ieasha Prime</b>	<b>Public schooling High School-theater major from the Duke Ellington school of the Arts.</b>	<b>BA from Howard University in mass communications</b>	<b>Fajr Center – Egypt Dar al-Zahra – Yemen, Classical training with teachers</b>	<b>English Arabic</b>
<b>Kaltun Karani</b>	<b>Private Arabic elementary school in Syria Public high school in Ohio</b>	<b>BA in marketing MEd in educational counseling</b>	<b>BA from al-Maghreb Institute</b>	<b>Arabic English Somali</b>

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### Summary of Backgrounds

The educational background of each of the teacher-leaders demonstrated her intellectual acumen and extensive qualifications and became the foundation of her leadership. All of the teacher-leaders demonstrated intelligence and commitment to learning. Ansari was a precocious child who memorized all the names of the various oriental rugs at her father's carpet business. She learned three languages and graduated from a secondary school program deemed difficult for native speakers of English. Jamillah Karim was good at all of her school subjects and completed an engineering degree along with her BA in religious studies. She was awarded a scholarship based on merit and completed her PhD in Islamic Studies from Duke University. Zainab Alwani became a researcher before she graduated with her first university degree and studied for her master's and PhD in a second language learned in adulthood. Halima Krausen learned to read and write at four years old, and by the time she was nine she was sneaking into her parent's library to read history and theology. Kaltun Karani traveled from country to

country, never losing her commitment to learning and when her counselor set a ceiling in her progression she pushed back and completed two bachelor's degrees and a master's. Shehnaz Karim dazzled her philosophy professors with her ability to both grasp philosophical concepts and argue them from various angles. When she went to Syria, she became fluent in Arabic in a short time, and later, when she moved to Montreal, she learned French. Ieasha Prime went to an elite high-school, graduated from Howard University, and was able to register at Dal al-Zahra, a woman's university in Yemen, where she studied Islam in Arabic after a short period of language-learning time.

Their intelligence and educational background were all evident, though their qualifications and reasons for legitimacy and community clout were different. Zaynab Ansari's qualifications were that she studied 'overseas' and she became known through her online work. Dr. Zainab Alwani had a PhD, but her association with her father was an important part of her positioning in the community. Jamillah Karim also had a PhD, but her community clout was rooted in her background, activism and lifestyle. Shehnaz Karim's association with her husband, as well as his pushing her to the forefront, granted her popularity and the ability to teach what she had learned in Syria. Ieasha Prime's high school education in theater gave her stage presence, which she used well when teaching and talking about her traditional learning. Halima Krausen was a successful leader in her community without an academic degree, but with deep grounding in traditional learning. Kaltun Karani used her counseling background and her second bachelors to gain footing in the world of religious leadership.

### **Becoming a Leader**

The path to leadership was not the same amongst the participants of my study, but there were commonalities. All seven of the women I studied spoke of significant people or events in

their lives that catapulted them into leadership. Some were clear-cut and others were subtle, but for each woman there was a reason for her foray into the world of scholarship, teaching and religious leadership.

### **Significant Others**

For some women, there were significant others in their lives whose example and/or encouragement set the precedent for leadership. Ieasha Prime, Zainab Alwani, Halima Krausen, and Shehnaz Karim all had either teachers or (in Zainab Alwani's case) a parent who believed in them, prepared them, and pushed them into the world of teacher-leadership.

**Ieasha Prime.** Soon after setting up her first nonprofit organization, Ieasha Prime realized there were very few, if any, women scholars who looked like her (African American). This vacuum, along with a personal yearning to “know her dīn [religion]” were instrumental in her decisions to travel to so many places and learn from the teachers whom she attached herself to. She said, “When I think about the women of color that I serve, a lot of times, they don't have access to teachers who look like me. And who are willing to say, ‘Okay, let's go. We'll take up this mantle. Okay, I will teach in a larger setting.’ There's a lot of times, a lot of our women, may Allah bless you immensely, a lot of our sisters who do go over to Syria or to Egypt or what they call ‘over east’ to study, many of them don't come back and aren't willing to necessarily teach publicly. I think ...especially for American women and particularly for African American women, these women are out in public all the time in their professional lives, in their professional careers, and so to see somebody - I think - who's willing to be with them in that sphere with the religious standpoint, they often describe to me as something that's empowering and relatable.” She herself was heavily influenced by the teachers, and especially the women teachers she met along her way. She followed one to Egypt and another to Yemen. As she was

influenced by women who cared deeply for their faith, she took up the mantle to offer that service to other women. She spoke of one of her teachers, “Alhamdulillah, she was a teacher for seven years in Syria and then another seven to nine in Yemen, and so I met her after Syria in Yemen, and just seeing how young and fiery and... just seeing her nonstop passion to establish Islam and yet, she has definitely developed a high level of knowledge, but there is something that’s very grounded about her teaching.” Prime connected to her teacher and saw in her an example of who she could be, “...that was really important for me. How do we take all of these lofty concepts and bring them right down to the ground of our everyday situations and to be a real source of healing for everyday people.” Prime’s teaching leadership is tightly connected to the examples of teachers she met during her years studying.

**Zainab Alwani.** Alwani sought learning and leadership in order to follow in her father’s footsteps and uphold his legacy. She joined the Fiqh council of North America hoping to continue his work. She said explaining the work of the Fiqh council, “Being here in America, the fiqh itself, it becomes part of Islamic thought. It becomes issues that we have to study. And that was mainly what attracted me to this council, because they used to have many meetings, different meetings, with experts in that field, related to every question that was posed.” She said the council would meet with experts in all the related fields for each question, discuss and discuss again. “They discuss those issues at a highly scholarly level, and then they come up with certain answers. ... I remember my father published so many papers.” She described how her father dealt with marriages that were being contracted at the mosque, but not legally, leaving women vulnerable and without protection of the law. “He wrote that paper and then he published it. And alhamdulillah it solved so many issues and problems.” It was this type of work she stepped into, “That’s what I was hoping to continue. Not to just stop and stay with this, the

*hilal* [crescent-moon] issue, or Ramadan and aid and this. But, well, it's hard.” The *hilal* and Ramadan issues were related to the start and stop of the holy month of fasting, and aid issues were related to sending charity overseas. She was deeply interested in solving societal issues through religious rulings and this was in the footsteps of her father, Sheikh Tahir Jabir al-Alwani. He had his bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate from al-Azhar University in Islamic studies. He was a scholar-activist, who wrote more than 30 books, and actively promoted his vision of Muslim life in America, which included both a strong foundation in faith and service to society and community. Zainab Alwani walked in those footsteps. She worked very hard to complete her education, and during that time she never stopped her own research. She became a walking wealth of information, but remained humble. Her sense of duty to community and commitment to her faith held her hand through the hard years, and still did, as she continued to address community issues.

**Halima Krausen.** Halima Krausen’s move into a leadership position began very pragmatically. “I became the right hand of my teacher. When he was traveling, when he was ill or something, I did his [work]. So, people were used to me being in that position. They came to me with their problems, and so when he retired, then I just took over. That’s it, and nobody bothered. I was the imam of the German-speaking community for 20 years and nobody noticed.” She chuckled at the concept of doing something so controversial in other spaces, but without difficulty in hers and then added, “It's actually what I believe...just do the things. Don't discuss them, don't make it into a demonstration.” Furthering her leadership credentials, Krausen took the mantle of the Chisti tariqa and became a sheikha, meaning that she was part of the chain of spiritual guides that traced back to Prophet Muhammad. This particular honor was bestowed upon her in a semi-formal ceremonial event recorded and posted to YouTube (IICSC, 2014). It

was unusual for a woman to carry this status within tariqas, but Krausen referred to the originator of her tariqa, Sheikh Moinuddin Chisti, and said that he said, “If it were acceptable in society, then I would name my daughter my successor.” She used this as foundational to her leadership and asked herself, “Is this acceptable to the community? Is it acceptable for society?” She added, “Personally, I never do public things without making sure that all people who are concerned agree with it.” She avoided public controversy in this way and pushed for the changes she hoped to see in a quieter manner.

Halima studied because she wanted knowledge; leadership came to her because her work was recognized as extraordinary. After twenty years as imam of the German Community, Halima left and was appointed an instructor at Hamburg University, though she did not have a formal degree. The school recognized in her scholarship a vast education, so though she could not be part of the official faculty, she was hired as an instructor and taught classes. This appointment added an academic level to her leadership. She was now imam, sheikha and professor.

**Shehnaz Karim.** Shehnaz Karim fell in love with her teachers in Syria and when she returned to Canada, she determined to live their legacy, even to the extent of wearing a Syrian styled hijab and calling herself *anse* [the colloquial Arabic word for teacher]. Then, when she married, her husband encouraged her, from day one of their work together to ‘be out there’ teaching. By out there he meant teaching online and teaching to mixed gender audiences. He was a sheikh himself and came from a background where it was not the norm to stand next to your wife and teach, but he believed in this vision. S. Karim discussed her own feelings of trepidation around her public persona and leadership role, “I was encouraged to a lot. I mean it was supportive, it was caring, but I think I always felt worried about it that maybe this is not the

right way... That's kind of the subtext of it to be honest with you. For him, it would be like I'm encouraging you and I see your value and I know that people will benefit from you and you're just like, 'No,' because you're like holier-than-thou or something... I kind of just went along with it, really in my heart, saying, 'Ya Allah, I haven't consulted my teachers about this, but I'm doing this Ya Rabbi because that's what my husband is asking. Please take account on that basis because I don't know if I'm doing the right thing...but my husband's asking me to do it, it's really clearly important for him. He wants to support women. He wants to make sure that it's not just men out there, so I'm going just as somebody under orders.'" Though S. Karim worried about stepping into leadership, she had done so on many fronts. She taught online and in person classes and was the executive director of their jointly-founded organization. She spoke about her insecurities in these roles, "Then, in terms of leading, I mean I kind of play a role of being a manager or a director of the actual organization. I really need to learn how to do that properly because it is intertwined with teaching, but I think more and more I'm being asked to disentangle those two things and to just try to use like normal management techniques. I think that makes a lot of sense because like instead of seeing something as a spiritual problem... instead of having the solution, 'Okay, go and read some Quran and just take a rest from the work that you're doing'...There are other approaches that people want to take now."

S. Karim ran an organization that spanned two provinces, had students across the globe, was active online and she continued to uphold the legacy of her teachers and the vision of her husband.

Shehnaz Karim, Ieasha Prime, Zainab Alwani and Halima Krausen all had significant influence from either teachers or family members that instigated their leadership. They were either following in footsteps or fulfilling a teaching or a vision. S. Karim and Alwani were

influenced by the men in their lives who encouraged them and gave them space and platforms. Prime and Krausen were influenced by personal teachers who demonstrated the road of leadership and helped them walk on it.

### **Community Influences**

The communities that surrounded Jamillah Karim were instrumental to her growth into leadership. From the Nation of Islam<sup>11</sup>, to the academic community at Duke University, to the larger American Muslim community, J. Karim was supported and inspired by the people she met along the way

**Jamillah Karim.** As a member of the second graduating class of the Warith Deen Mohammed High School in Atlanta, Jamillah Karim was a child of a highly educated community. She and her classmates studied Quran and Hadith, and other Islamic topics, but they also studied great African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and others. She said, “I definitely got a sense of pride early on, or maybe this comfort in my Muslim community early on. I definitely understood its significance and that we were different in a way and I appreciated that difference.”

She was also rooted in the wider African-American community, “I definitely feel like it was a ... maybe a typical African-American Muslim childhood, especially coming from the Warith Deen Mohammad community<sup>12</sup>, where our parents were very much, they were very passionate about building community, establishing institutions and so we were very blessed to be a part of that, but also we were very much situated in our real community that ... to do summer camp for instance or even just to have a larger black Christian family.” By real community J.

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<sup>11</sup> Nation of Islam see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nation-of-Islam>

<sup>12</sup> The Sunni Muslim community that grew out of the Nation of Islam through the leadership of Warith Deen Mohammad.



Karim was referring to the community she lived in. Her extended family was educated and higher middle income. She spoke about her grandparents, “He went to Morehouse, I guess like in the 40s or 50s, and then he went, it might be 50s, and then he went to ... he went to Howard Dental School and my granny went to Spelman, so they were definitely amongst the educated elite in Atlanta.” They were also involved in the early civil rights movement, “Dr. King was at my grandfather's home when he got the call that it happened [the Birmingham bombing] and so they all, like Dr. King and his closest people, they went into my grandfather's bedroom and my grandfather went with them, he was like ‘I'm not gonna miss this opportunity.’ They were all sitting on the bed kinda strategizing. That's the family that my father came from.”

Jamillah Karim was also a natural leader, “I recognized my leadership capacity... going back to high school.” And she was given important platforms for preaching and teaching early in her career. Zaytuna college invited her to share the speaking platform with Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, which was an exciting honor for J. Karim, “I was one of the early woman speakers for Zaytuna. Zaytuna had a fundraiser in 2005 and I still have the postcard for that, or the bill, whatever, their advertisement was for that and it said, ‘Sheikh Hamza Yusuf and Jamillah Karim’ and that was like amazing, because I was a fan of Sheikh Hamza.” Her focus in her speaking and teaching was Islam in America, and this was a new topic in the early twenty-first century. But the woman who most influenced her thinking around women’s leadership was Tayyaba Taylor.<sup>13</sup> Jamillah Karim said “I think what really started to open my awareness up was probably Tayyaba Taylor because I was starting to interact with her more and bond with her. We went on an interfaith pilgrimage. She was one of the first women willing to speak at large conference gatherings. I

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor was the founder, publisher and editor in chief of Aziza magazine. She lectured and taught in 37 countries. Taylor died in 2014.

remember once raving over Sheikh Hamza or something, and she was like, ‘What about the women?’ J. Karim started teaching at Spelman college, a woman’s college in Atlanta, and this also started her thinking about gender and women’s leadership.

Jamillah Karim’s dissertation was a study of two communities. She looked at relationships between American Muslim women from the immigrant community and the African American community. Her dissertation became the book, *American Muslim Woman: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. In her book she addressed the race and culture gap and offered solutions. She saw a need in the community and wrote about it and spoke about it.

When she decided to leave the academic world, she was already leading the wider Muslim community. This was also when she began her blog, which she called a pivotal moment. “You know I started my blog in Malaysia, too. That was, I think, really pivotal. And the reason I even started it, we met with an expat family from the UK there, and the woman there ... because usually it was the men who were there, working or in school. They recommended that I really do something, so that ... I just felt, just to make things more fulfilling and then that’s why I thought about blogging.” The blog was the beginning of her new life as a community leader and speaker.

After that, two other events pushed her further into the role of leadership, her husband’s second marriage and her decision to join the Tijani tariqa. Both events were very personal, but they had an effect on her leadership position. Her willingness to enter into a polygamous marriage gave her clout with men - they no longer saw her as a “feminist,” and even when she spoke about feminist issues, they began to listen. Her personality, too, gave her inroads into leadership that others did not find. She said, “I have some kind of leadership capacity and ability when it comes to educating men about gender, the gender *jihad* [struggle].”

## Duty

A sense of duty was the motivating factor for Kaltun Karani and Zaynab Ansari. They both believed that they were uniquely qualified to fulfill the need they saw in the Muslim community, and so stepped up to fulfill it.

**Kaltun Karani.** Karani stepped forward into leadership with gingerly steps but determined to continue out of a sense of duty. She said, “I’ve always been the kind of person who spoke well in front of a crowd, and because of it, people would tell me, ‘O Kaltun, you go and talk.’” An incident occurred where she was talking to young girls and one of them asked her a question to which she did not have the answer. She commented, “I felt like I’m not ready for this. Like I can’t answer her question, you know? And I talked to somebody and that person said, ‘You misguided her.’ And I freaked out, I really freaked out and I said I’m not ready for this, I can’t do this, I’m not gonna do it.” It took her two years to change her mind, but she heard a lecturer say “‘Even if you give a little bit, this was what the advice of the Prophet peace be upon him was, to give a little even if only one verse.’ So, I was like I want to do this. This is speaking to me.” It was not an easy step however as she had to overcome mosque politics and her brother’s opinion about the mosque she wanted to teach at. She spoke to another local leader who said, “What are your loyalties? To Allah or to your brother?” her response, “I was like... yaaaah to Allah! So, I started it.”

**Zaynab Ansari.** When Zaynab Ansari returned from her studies overseas, she was still in her early twenties and had yet to start university in America. Almost immediately she had students knocking on her door to learn what she had learned in her years in Iran and Syria. They said, “Look you’ve been in Damascus, we want to learn...we cannot travel, you have to do something” and so she did. Ansari also ‘did something’ when, faced with women’s stories of

spiritual abuse. In May, 2015, she wrote an article for the website “Muslim Matters” that addressed for the first time in a public forum, the concept of spiritual abuse. This article marked her as a brave and tell-it-like-it-is leader. She was heavily criticized by some and complimented by others. She mentioned phone calls that asked her to recant, found fault in her argument and more. In our interview she said, “I still stand by that article” and it was because of the article that she became much more widely known. The article was shared 5.7 thousand times – read by countless people and commented on in long drawn-out discussions in page after page of comments. Ansari herself responded to many of these comments.

When her husband died, she questioned whether or not she could continue in the vein of leadership. Again, she was told that she must. She was holding space for women and there were so few with her qualifications. She pulled herself together and continued walking the road of leadership. It became more difficult for her to manage traveling because she no longer had automatic child-care (in her husband), but her parents were supportive, as were some organizations that brought both her and her children to their events in order to have her speak. In Ansari’s estimation it was her educational background, encouraged by her parent and sealed by her sense of duty and the feeling of responsibility put upon her by others, that thrust her into her leadership position.

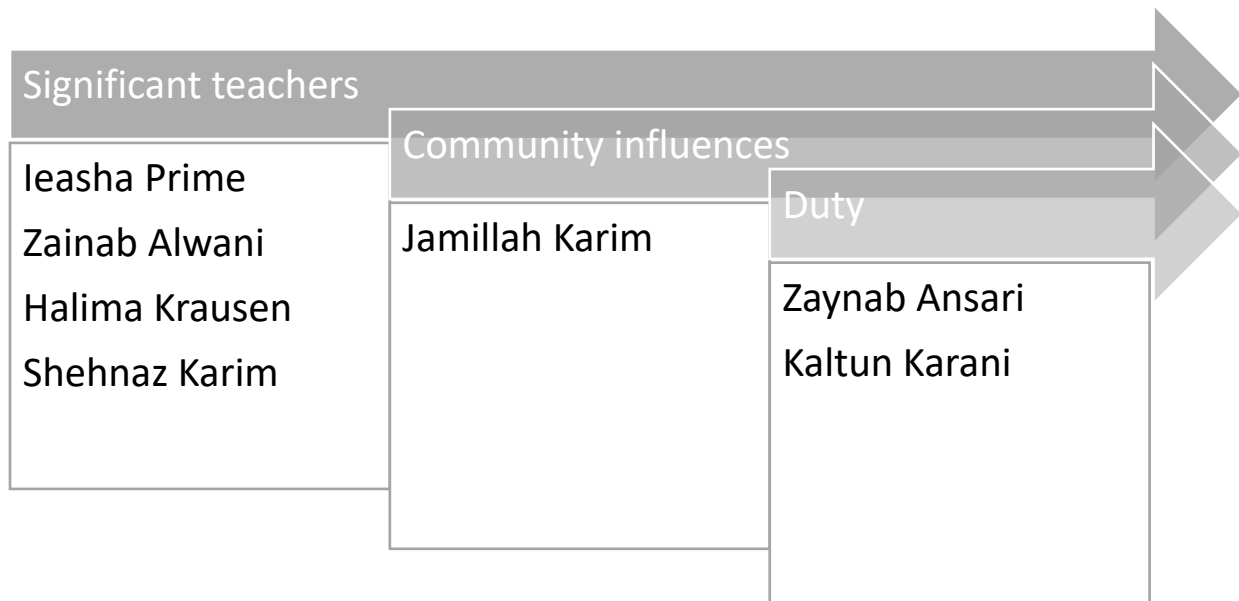


Figure 1. Becoming Leaders

### Living Leadership

Questions of dress, honorific, and ritual were part of the leadership lives of Muslim women teacher leaders that I studied. Each tackled the questions in their own way, but these topics were an integral part of their day-to-day lives.

### Hijab

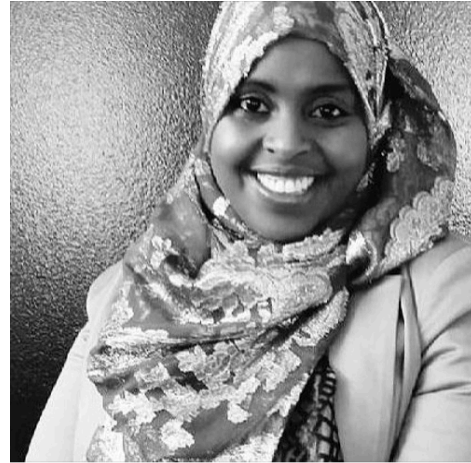
None of the women I studied wore *niqab*, or the face cover. All wore hijab, or a head scarf and loose clothing.

**Kaltun Karani.** Karani was intentional in her dress. She stopped wearing makeup because she realized that young people were looking at her as an example of a woman in hijab. She intentionally left aside the traditional Somali hijab (which flowed from the top of the head to the wrists), opting instead for a wrap scarf. She commented about her hijab, “You know, there's a whole fashion thing, and because it's natural for me to want to look nice, still modest, within the Islamic perspective. I feel like it delivers that message that you could look good with a hijab. You could look good and still be wearing hijab the way the Quran and hadith want you to wear hijab. And it resonates with a lot of my students, I know I come from a community, the Somali community, where we believe in that, the big [flowing scarf] - Girls are taught if you don't wear that, you're not wearing hijab. So, what I'm wearing, tells them it doesn't have to be like that, but it does have to be - it has to fulfill certain rules. And everybody in the community was like Kaltun doesn't wear proper hijab, like they would [backbite and gossip] and say, ‘That girl teaches our girls, she doesn't even wear hijab!’ Because to us, in our community, this is not hijab.” She did this in order to demonstrate to the young that there were acceptable options in hijab. Somali culture claimed that women who wore any scarf different than the typical long Somali one, was not wearing hijab at all. She knew this was not an Islamic precept and wanted to demonstrate that. Later one woman, who had originally criticized her for opting out of the typical Somali styled hijab, admitted to telling her daughter, who was arguing about hijab as a whole, that if she dressed ‘like Kaltun’ it would be fine. Karani felt a minor victory in her intentionality of dressing. “So that lady, now that her daughter is a teenager, she wants to wear this. So, she said to her, ‘if you wear it the way Kaltun wore it, I'll be okay.’”



Figure 2. Typical Somali hijab

Changing her hijab style was an act of leadership. Going against community norms for the purpose of guiding and helping the next generation was not easy, but for Karani it was necessary. She said, “And it was hard for me to like- I had to talk to my teachers and say, ‘Is this hijab?’ ‘cause I don't want to also not do enough, or something I'm not obligated to do. When I learned that hijab could be in so many different ways, that was enlightening. Look at the woman in Malaysia, look at the woman in Syria, look at the woman in West Africa. We don't have to wear one thing, but it does have to have the same ruling. So, I'm like if it's doing a service to our youth where they wear what they're happy with and it still covers the rules of Islam – then I am happy.”



*Figure 3. Kaltun Karani's hijab style*

**Jamillah Karim.** Dr. Karim was also conscious of her audience when choosing what style of hijab to wear. She spoke of a recent conference she attended as a speaker, “It was the most diverse conference in terms of ethnicity [and] Muslims diverse in practice and perspective and age. So many women from the Warith Deen Mohammed community were coming, they're gonna be in their wraps. So, it's just a mixture, a combination, but then you also had second-generation immigrants and then ... just everyone there, and then women who didn't cover. Most women actually were covering, just in a variety of ways. And I just really felt like I wanted to ... I wanted to connect, I want to feel accessible. And I made a conscious choice to have my ears out.”



*Figure 4. Jamillah Karim in a style of hijab that shows her ears*

She was coming to them as ‘one of them’ so that she could reach them and be accessible as a leader. On other days and in other places she wore her scarf in a more traditional style, but she avoided anything tight, “A lot of times it really just depends on the outfit to be honest with you. It just depends on how the hijab is working. I personally cannot, I’m very uncomfortable with the hijab around my neck really tight... But even just my own level of comfort, I think, is why my dominant way is kinda with the longer scarf, the longer scarf and it’s kinda draped around and pulled back, but not pinned because I just can’t take it.” She thought about fashion, impression, and comfort. She added, “And of course, spirituality and what’s pleasing to Allah.”

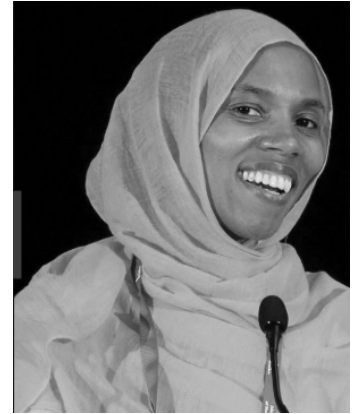


Figure 5. Jamillah Karim in a traditionally styled hijab

**Zainab Alwani.** Alwani was also concerned about the sensibilities of her audience and she carried a great sense of responsibility attached to her choice of clothing. She said, “I consider it as though I am not only representing the Ummah, the Muslim Ummah [Muslim peoples], but also I’m the representative of Maryam [mother of Jesus] and the Mother of Moses and all of these women.” She considered very deeply how she represented herself, “I also look at the way people will look at that woman who is working and teaching and helping. So not only the hijab itself, or how I wear it, as much as I’m more concerned about what I contribute, how I behave, how I act, how I respond, how I talk.”

Alwani stretched the leadership inherent in her hijab to her actions as well. She also adjusted her style depending on audience. “So, hijab is not really for me only the scarf or how to wear it. But I pay attention of course to of all this. So sometimes I wear the *jilbab* [overcoat], which for me I prefer to wear, but not all the time. Because also I want the young generation to



look at different styles, but you have to be careful about modesty. If it shows your body or some ... you pay attention to this. So, when I wear skirts, I prefer sometimes to wear a skirt or even dress. I always have in mind someone else from the younger generation is looking and watching.” She recognized that her clothing sent a message to her audience, and she thought about who she was speaking to or working with when choosing her clothing. “Because you are with so many people and I'm teaching Christians, others, or non-believers. And you also teach Muslims. And you have young and old, where you have different generations. And I feel I need to send a message to each one. Sometimes they only see the outside - whatever you are wearing and how you wear it.”



*Figure 6. Zaynab Alwani in hijab*

Alwani was also conscious of cultural differences and wished to demonstrate the validity of various cultural hijab styles in her own style. “In fact, I try to represent different cultures. So, if I'm working with African Americans or something, I try also to present the colors maybe, the style. And if you are working with Arabs or others, so you have different [styles]. [These are] cultures that you embrace, and you want to send that message to all of them.” Alwani’s hijab choices were tightly braided into her leadership and she thought deeply about the interaction between the two.

**Zaynab Ansari.** Ansari was also very intentional about her hijab. “You know, I do find myself ... When I know I'm going to be in a certain setting, especially if it's a mixed setting, I do have a preference for clothing and colors and styles that are just sort of more conservative. And this is really two-fold. I mean, partially owing to my understanding of hijab, but also because I really feel that as women we just struggle to be taken seriously, even wearing hijab, and I want to be taken seriously. And I know that if I'm wearing something that's too colorful or too pastel or perceived as being too feminine, that there might be that issue there. It is kind of a double-edged sword. Not being taken seriously, and also maybe being seen as kind of being ... What's the word? Maybe too decorative or something along those lines.”



*Figure 7. Zaynab Ansari in hijab*

She discussed the fine line she walked between dressing for a message and dressing for beauty. She noted that people were definitely paying attention. She said with incredulity and frustration that someone had once told her that he and his wife watched her videos in order to see what she was wearing. “I know that even though I don't want to kind of attribute any larger meaning to what I wear or choose to wear, I do know that people pay attention. Because I've just been in odd situations where men have commented on what I ... Like on Facebook, I remember someone said his wife ... he and his wife watched my videos just to see what I'm wearing. And I'm just like ... What kind of a strange thing is this?... At the end of the day, people will say, “Well, you shouldn't have worn that one. You should have worn that [other] hijab.’ You know, that type of thing. People do pay attention. And I feel that for me, I have to make sure that ... I don't know. I think it's a very kind of fine line that I'm walking, because like I said, I want to be

taken seriously, but I also feel that hijab ultimately ... It really lends femininity to the woman without making her an object of temptation. And that to me is actually a really beautiful thing. I really admire traditional Muslim fashion and this type of thing.”

**Ieasha Prime.** Ieasha Prime started to wear hijab before converting to Islam. She was in West Africa, it was a holiday and she was concerned about offending the host family. She told the story, “The eldest brother, came over to me and said, ‘Ieasha, what's wrong?’ And I explained to him why I was feeling conflicted and I don't remember all his words, I just remember ... The way ... What I remember is him saying, ‘Our women are too noble and too respectable, that they cannot just sit with any men that come in. These men are from ... they're from everywhere. I immediately understood hijab. I can't explain it. I just understood hijab and I asked at that moment for his sister to come. I didn't want to come out again. And I was like, ‘OK, you have to hook me up, fix me, fix me.’”

Now that Prime was a leader, she chose her clothes for many different reasons. On one hand she was careful not to wear pants, even if her pants would be wide and modest, because it might trigger immodest dressing in her students. She said, “I might want to wear pants, only because they're comfortable, because that's what I have, or that's not dry cleaned, or, you know. And all of my pants are wide. That's just my style. I don't wear tight pants. I'm not interested in men looking at my body. I'm not interested in that. I'm very much, my body is my business, and if you're not my husband, you don't need to be in my business. I'm not interested in- I've watched the way men watch women, and I don't like that. I don't like to be subjugated to strange men in that way. So, I don't even wear pants that you could see the shape of my legs. So, my



*Figure 8.* Ieasha Prime in hijab

style of pants is very wide, but there are times where I'm careful to wear them in the presence of my students.”

Prime thought often about hijab – how it affected relationships between women, how it irritated Islamophobic people, and how it empowered women. In addition to her hijab, she wore niqab for a short period of time in the USA, and while she was in Yemen, “I just had this epiphany about the lack of competition amongst women in a public space; and thinking about how women compete with each other, you know, in a very silly definition of femininity. And how that kind of tore down sisterhood. That's one thing. Another thing was I thought about the intimacy between husband and wife that you don't see other women unless they're your family or your spouse. So that was just very empowering to me and so I started wearing a niqab. And then there was this, you know, the decision to do it in America was very much like, ‘Yeah, in your face, and whatever you think about Muslim women...’ There was very much definitely a rebellious resistance inside of it.”

Prime wore make-up once in a while, but mostly did not. She said it made women look old. She spoke about earrings, “I love them. They're just a part of me, in the sense of, they are very much my artistic expression... but I am very careful to not show my ears.” Her primary concern regarding hijab was that she fulfilled the sharia requirements. She enjoyed the rebellious aspect of wearing hijab in America, and did not push her students to wear hijab, but spoke about its necessity. She felt rebellious wearing hijab because so many Islamophobic people thought it was oppressive, and she liked to be “in their face” Muslim. Hijab was a thoughtful part of Ieasha Prime’s leadership and a presentation of self to her audiences.

**Shehnaz Karim.** S. Karim was attached to the style of dress that her teachers had worn when she lived in Damascus, so she wore a white scarf that she tied under her chin. She also wore an overcoat atop of which she added a large wrap. I asked her about her hijab style and the wrap, “For me, I can't wear hijab any other way. I do things fully, so like this is it for me, like this is how I got my Islam, *subhanallah* [Glory be to God]. At home, obviously, I just like wrap something around my head if I just have to go, do something quickly, or even to pray sometimes when it's really hot or whatever, [but] I feel like I could never go out in public like that, like this is just everything to me. I don't have to explain, it's just what it is.” She said about the wrap, “When I got older, I found that my coats were a bit tight on top, so I started wearing the wraps over my shoulders.” And as it was Canada, the extra over scarf often brought warmth.



Figure 9. Shehnaz Karim in a Syrian styled scarf and her typical wrap

S. Karim was not thinking about her audience, but about her teachers and representing her learning in a way that felt legitimate to her. Her leadership was connected to how she became a leader, and in her desire to walk in the same legacy.

**Halima Krausen.** Krausen was not in the least concerned with her image or how her



Figure 11. Halima Krausen in her typical white wrap scarf

hijab looked to anyone else. When I asked her, she said simply, “No. No, no, no. I feel that I put on what I feel like, what I feel comfortable in and that's it.” I pressed her on the issue of imagery and leadership,



Figure 10. Iconic drawing of Halima Krausen

and she said, “There are images, yes, maybe images of Muslim women leaders, but I think the best way of presenting that image is being yourself.” However, in dozens of google images Halima was not seen in anything but in a white wrap scarf. In fact, her ‘look’ had become so iconic that the Radical Middle Way created a cartoon image of her in her hijab to advertise her upcoming tour. She did say that she was grateful to be able to ‘throw on her scarf’ and go, that she was never a ‘stand in front of the mirror’ type of woman, so perhaps her iconic image is just a result of easy-to-match-white, instead of S. Karim’s well-thought-out imagery of her own teachers.

### **Hijab Summary**

All seven women wore hijab and presented an image of a practicing Muslim woman. Six of the seven admitted to serious thought around the style and color of her hijab. The only teacher-leader who claimed to pay no attention to her style wore a consistent enough style that a recognizable cartoon was created from her image. Hijab is indeed a signifier of practice and religiosity for Muslim women, and those who stood in the space of leadership paid attention to how they presented themselves to others in their hijab.

### **Honorifics and Titles**

Honorifics available to Muslim women teacher-leaders were many but none had an official definition. Some were called *ustadha*, a classical Arabic word for teacher, and others were called *sheikha*, another classical word that meant teacher, or elder woman, or even a member of the royal family in the Gulf. The question of title was important, but only those with an academic doctorate and Sheikha Halima Krausen had a clear title, though it differed at different points in her life.

**Sheikha.** Within Muslim circles the title *ustadha* generally referred to someone who was a younger or newer teacher than *sheikha*. *Sheikha* could refer to someone of great spiritual sagacity, and/or scholarly learning, so some of the teacher-leaders I interviewed shied away from it.

Zaynab Ansari, for example, was adamant that people would not call her *sheikha*. She did not want to have a title that overly honored her, but on the other hand she was cognizant of the problematic ‘Sister’ in front of her name, which reduced her scholarship and questioned her legitimacy as a teacher-leader. “I’m okay with *ustadha*, but, *sheikha*, I absolutely reject. I’m like, ‘No. Please don’t call me that.’ But *ustadha*, I’m okay with that. Or just honestly ‘Sister Zaynab.’ You know, but I know I have to be careful with that too, because I think as women, we undercut our own authority. It’s not always a healthy thing for us or for our audience.” Halima Krausen, on the hand, had the honorific of *sheikha* bestowed upon her by her spiritual elder in a small ceremony where she was handed the mantle of the *tariqa*, and the honorific of Imam granted her when she took over the position from her predecessor. As such when I asked her about title she said quite clearly, “Yes I am a teacher of the Chisti tradition.” And she had students or *mureeds* on this Sufi path so she was called *sheikha* now more often than *imam* (especially since she had left the position of *imam* of the mosque for her academic position at the University of Hamburg).

**Imam.** Halima was the only woman formally called *imam*. The term *imam* was used globally to mean the person who was in charge of religious affairs at the mosque. It was also used to denote the prayer-leader. All of the women I interviewed had been an *imam* for women, but only Halima had prayed as *imam* for men and women and taken on the title in reference to her mosque responsibilities. She had two honorific titles, *imam* and *sheikha*. When she left the

mosque, she was no longer called imam, however, and Sheikha Halima Krausen became her official title.

**Doctor.** Dr. Jamillah Karim and Dr. Zainab Alwani had titles handed to them by virtue of their studies. Doctorate work had a clear definition in society, and it was clear who had earned the title and who had not. These titles were easiest to hold on to.

**Ustadha and related titles.** Zaynab Ansari, Ieasha Prime, Kaltun Karani, and Shehnaz Karim were all addressed by the honorific *'ustadha'*. Kaltun Karani said she was horrified the first time she saw the title *ustadha* in front of her name. "The first time somebody used it was one of my students. She made a flyer, or I made a flyer and she fixed it, and she put *Ustadha Kaltun Karani*, I said 'what is that?' I freaked out. And she told to me own it." Kaltun's elementary school experience in Syria gave her nostalgia for the term *anse* (colloquial for *ustadha*), but she did not use it. Shehnaz Karim, on the other hand, usually went by the title *anse*, especially in her home community. This was a conscious choice, she said, "I did it out of love for ... Like I just love that name. I feel like I don't know, *ustadha* doesn't sound natural to me, but I mean my husband made people call me something. We used to be in a *tariqa*, where every woman was called by a respectful title. Every woman was called *mella*. No matter who you were, you were called *mella* which is like a North African version of *anse* or *hajja* [one who has gone on *hajj*] or something. Then, all the men were called *seedi* [sir], no matter who, like nobody was differentiated from the other. Then, we stepped away from that particular *tariqa*. Then, I guess he just felt like all of these young kids are like in their 20s, whatever, they're his students and they don't know how to address me, so he was just like, "Call her *anse*, don't just call her.. Shehnaz." Some posters and advertisements featured Shehnaz Karim with the title of *ustadha* or even *sheikha*, but her preferred and most often used honorific was *anse*.



Table 3

Honorifics and Titles

Name	Ustadha	Sheikha	Dr.	Other
Zaynab Ansari	★	★		
Zainab Alwani		★	★	
Jamillah Kareem			★	
Shehnaz Karim	★	★		★ (Anse)
Halima Krausen		★		★ (Imam)
Ieasha Prime	★	★		
Kaltun Karani	★			

### Ritual

Muslim worship life was filled with ritual and jurisprudence to regulate it. Regular and required daily prayers, called *salat*, were practiced five times a day. Supplications were recited together, and the Quran was recited aloud as a form of worship. Worship was considered a nourishing practice for individuals and an important group activity. Praying together on Fridays was a requirement for men (with some exceptions) and there were special prayers in Ramadan called *tarawīh* prayers when the entire community gathered together to pray. How did the women I studied interact with Islamic ritual as leaders?

**Leading Salat.** Muslims pray five times a day and the question of women leading these prayers was an early discussion among scholars and schools of thought. The majority view for the four Sunni schools of thought was that prayer leadership for an audience of men and women, or men alone, had a condition of maleness, meaning neither a woman, nor a confirmed hermaphrodite, could lead the collective prayer. The Shafi'is and Hanbalis considered a woman

leading other women as rewarded, while the Hanafi's did not encourage it, but ruled the collective prayer of women, with a female imam, as valid. The Maliki's, on the other hand, ruled that it was not valid for a woman to lead any prayer – not even that of a collective group of women (al-Jazīrī, 2009). The Hanbalis ruled that women could lead men in voluntary prayers, with conditions, and some later Hanafi jurists ruled that all women prayers, led by women, were not discouraged or disliked. The argument that women could not lead men in prayer was challenged by David Jalajel in his *Women and Leadership in Islamic Law* (2017), where he found that though each school had a different textual basis for forbidding women to lead prayers, none of the evidence fulfilled the evidentiary requirements of the school itself (Jalajel, 2017).

In 2005, Dr. Amina Wadud caused a stir when she prayed as imam for a mixed gender group of Muslims in New York. Halima Krausen, the only woman I studied who was willing to lead a mixed group in prayer, appreciated Wadud's provocation, she said, "I think it was absolutely necessary to trigger a general discussion, which was completely different from the same discussion 20 years earlier, and sometimes somebody has to kind of trigger some discussion like that. I'm not the one. I'm not the type. There are people who can do that, and it's fine." Wadud's prayer opened the door to conversation around the issue of female led prayers, and it also created a definitive issue; if a woman believed she could lead men she must be one of 'those feminists.'" Most of the women I interviewed were quick to report that they did not pray as imam for mixed gender prayers, were not advocates of such prayers, and had no interest in leading salah for men. Only Halima Krausen led ritual prayers for men and women, but then only when every member of the congregation was in agreement. She was not a rabble rouser but rather a quiet and determined leader concerned with theological questions. She said if only one person disagreed, she would abdicate the position of imam for that prayer to someone

else. In her discussion paper (2005) about this issue she discussed the possibility of women praying as an imam within traditional (not progressive) Muslim thought, and in her opinion, it was an accepted practice (Krausen, 2005).

Ansari was concerned that women had stopped leading one another in prayer but she was not in support of women leading mixed gender prayers, she said, “So I do lead prayer for other women, because I feel that that's a very important sunnah that women have left off, and I really appreciate the position in the Shafi'i school. So, I try to make a point of doing that if I'm in a female-only gathering. So, for me, I don't think ... This is just my personal opinion. I don't think it's, this big sort of advancement for women to lead a mixed gender prayer. Because I see prayer as being something so intensely personal, and ... Yeah. I would just ... I personally would be extremely uncomfortable at the idea of leading men in prayer. And also, I just don't find much textual support for that anyway.”

**Du`a [supplication].** As Muslim women participated in leadership, new habits of ritual leadership were developing. Ansari reminisced, “Now, at the `Alim program, they did actually ask me to lead the du`a (supplication) after the prayer, because they felt like they wanted the women to lead something. And I'm like, "Well ... " I felt a little bit put on the spot there, because I prefer to make du`a in private.” But she did make du`a then and at other times as well.

Interestingly, Bilal Ware during the research for his book *The Walking Quran* (2014) found that while men in West Africa led the ritual prayer (salat), West African women usually led the supplicatory prayer (du`a) after the salat (Bilal Ware, personal communication, April, 2018). This allowed for a shared experience of the ritual prayer.

**Reciting Quran.** Ansari was most concerned about Quran recitation. She felt that women's involvement in the ritual of reciting Quran had been erased. She said, “But what I do

feel is very important when it comes to women and kind of leadership roles within ritual worship is, I would like to see women have more ... What's the word? A higher profile when it comes to recitation of the Quran. I find it very problematic that more women are not given the opportunity to open and close public programs and meetings and conferences with the Quran. I don't really understand why that's this controversial thing that it's been.”

Ieasha Prime recited Quran in tajwīd during her lecture at RIS in 2017. This recitation may have been a sign of an attitude change amongst Muslims regarding women and Quran recitation, because there was no online or other discussion about it, whereas a few years earlier another teacher-leader, Tahira Ahmed, opened a lecture at ISNA with Quran recited in tajwīd and there was an enormous amount of backlash (Karklina, 2013; Hafiz, 2013). Shehnaz Karim had her ijaza in the recitation of Quran and recited before her classes, prayed the ritual prayer with women, and made du`a in front of men and women.

**Organizing rituals.** Jamillah Hakim was part of a WhatsApp group that had as its main purpose the gathering of prayers and blessings for their teachers. She was the leader in this process and regularly organized the participants to recite Quran and other phrases of praise in honor of their sheikhs. When collecting Quran, she began with “<3 Alhamdulillah! Pledges for Arabic Khatma al-Quran for Shaykh Hassan (rta),” gave them a completion date and then listed the numbered parts of the Quran, keeping track of who pledged and who completed each portion. Or, if collecting phrases of praise, she began with “(picture of the Kaaba) As Salaamu Alaikum, Dear Sahabatu Ruhul Adab [my companions of the spirit of goodness]. We are initiating another cycle of (Arabic) *hasbunallah wa ni'mal wakil* on behalf of the participants in the (name of Whatsapp) group. May Allah bless us and protect us and our families out of the intentional

created Light and Mercy from which Allah has fashioned our beloved Prophet Muhamad S.A.W. (Arabic). To be completed by 9:00am on (date).” (personal communication, 2018).

**Personal ritual.** Ritual extended into their personal lives as well. All of the women had personal worship routines that they attended to. Kaltun reported that praying *tahajjud* [middle of the night prayers] and reciting Quran were the necessary fuel for her day and if she missed them, she felt that she was just “running around’ instead of living her roles and goals and purpose. She said, “And what I've noticed as a mother, as a wife, as a grad student, as a teacher, as somebody who had a part-time job. I went crazy when I didn't have time for myself. And the only time I could create time for myself became tahajjud [night prayers]. So alhamdulillah, that became a habit along with Quran, along with the morning and the evening of dhikr [meditative practice]. If I missed those, Kaltun is just wild, crazy, running around. Recognizing that this is what fuels me, that's what connects me to Allah, that's what gives me presence, that's what focuses me on what's most important, that's what helps me.” Zainab Alwani also sought reassurance and recovery in Quran Recitation. She said in the worst difficulties of her life she sought solace in “my relationship with the Quran.”

Halima Krausen spent time in dhikr, or spiritual meditation, based on the litanies of her Sufi tariqa. She said, “I take time out for meditation. There are these meditations that we learn in the Sufi tradition, and the laws of teaching, I mean, I don't teach what I don't practice.” Zaynab Ansari practiced a dhikr she had learned when studying at Abu Nour, and Ieasha Prime had a list of litanies she had learned when in Yemen. Like the others, Shehnaz relied on her early morning worship to reinvigorate her, a combination of tahajjud, Quran, and dhikr helped her feel ready to face the day.

In general, the women participated in religious ritual in groups and individually. They did not regularly lead prayer for mixed groups, but were comfortable leading du`a, dhikr and Quran recitation efforts. They participated in worship rituals with women as part of their leadership, they participated in worship rituals with women, and on their own as a rejuvenating activity.

So far, we have discussed the road to leadership and aspects of lives in leadership. Next, I turned to the work of leadership and asked about the influence of feminism and the effects of misogyny and sexism on their work.

### **Feminism and Misogyny**

The term “feminism” did not appeal to the teacher-leaders of this study. Those who were willing to self-describe as feminist did so by re-inventing or re-defining the term.

#### **Halima Krausen**

Krausen did not identify as a feminist and said, “I have an eternal dislike for all words that end in ‘-ism.’” On the other hand, she expressed anger at the lack of women’s narratives in Islamic history. She said, “I was really angry when I did my first research, and I found out in the early scholars' biographies, in the classical scholars' biographies, they mentioned their teachers, men and women alike!... The biographers who collected works, I mean there were fewer women, but they were mentioned along with their achievements. And we don’t know that, neither from the Muslims nor from the outside Orientalist observance, so I was furious.” She also criticized Muslim feminists, “I have to criticize actually the methodology that many of the so-called, the feminist Muslim women researchers today, what they do, they focus on women's rights... forget about women’s rights... I think they have to go far beyond the idea of women's rights. We have to go to the whole kind of, let's say, concept of Quran, concept of creation.” Krausen was

unimpressed with the efforts, and even the goals of feminism. She was not looking for a movement that focused on the rights of women, but rather the very nature of humanity.

### **Zainab Alwani**

Alwani was also suspicious of the word feminism. She spoke of it at first as something that Muslims should deeply understand before adopting, “So feminism or feminist, it's really, I believe, it is a movement, a western movement. It has its own stages, and it's going from one stage to another. And now it became something different even. It requires, and it really invites us to, as women, as Muslim women, to study it thoroughly and try to filter so many concepts related to this, not only the movement, but the concept itself. So, I don't really accept for myself to be called feminist at all. Muslim feminist or not.” She recognized the argument that it was a movement for rights, but responded, “(Some say) it doesn't matter, it's just a movement, for Muslim women to gain their rights or something. But for me really no. It's a huge concept and it changes the, not only the world view itself theoretically, but in fact it has its own impact on the society, and the societies not only American or western, but now even into all other countries. Especially Muslim countries.” She reflected that she had a strong support system and then came back to the topic of feminism, “Yes. My husband and my sons, my children, really, they are very supportive alhamdulillah. When feminism comes with only women, women, women - I don't like this because I believe that (in Arabic: male believers and female believers are supporters one of another (a verse of Quran)). So, I had my father from the beginning. I had my grandfather. I had my uncle. I had my husband. My sons. I discuss many issues with them. Each one of them has mashallah, a different type of knowledge that they support me with.” She also cautioned that feminism was a global movement that had an impact on societies around the world. It affected family relationships, women’s social support systems, and everyone in society.

**Ieasha Prime**

Like Krausen and Alwani, Prime, though she was a speaker at the Women's March in 2017, did not self-identify as a feminist. She said, "Feminism is a term I don't use to describe myself, because of its academic implications. When we look at feminism as an ideology, I don't wish to be that. When I look at it from a philosophical standpoint, I think there are some things connected to feminism that are in direct conflict with our texts. Like for example the concept of gender being a social structure. I believe that gender is a divine structure. And there are multiple implications of that, right? Of saying that gender is a social structure. Because then I can remove it or not, I can ... it's deeply problematic." She added, "In the concept of patriarchy, the way patriarchy is understood, or should I say male leadership, understood, I believe, according to the definitions and the actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) are very different than even the way feminism describes patriarchy. And so, we have male leadership but my understanding in Surat al-Nissa, is that 'I created you from one essence.' So if we're cut from the same cloth, that removes the concept of hierarchy." On the other hand, she said about misogyny, "We have to do everything we can, and with all of the fiber of our being to fight against misogyny."

While this may seem like a dichotomy, for Prime, Alwani, and Krausen, it was up to Muslim women to fight against oppression against women. That fight was in cooperation with males and rooted in Islam. Prime said, "I think Islam is the solution to every problem."

**Kaltun Karani**

Karani focused on the misogyny she saw in both the Muslim community and the wider American community but did not see a solution in feminism. She listed her experiences with misogyny, "When I was 27 a woman said to me you need to get married - even if you got



married to a bad guy and just have a child and let go of him later. But you basically are expiring.” And “the literature and the way the culture portrayed women. Like you're weak, you're evil, you're nonsense, you don't have any value.” and “And I remember my Arab friends would say like your mom drives a car? And I'm like what's the big deal about that?” In her family, as well, she witnessed women shushing one another in order to allow the men to speak. Her reaction to all of this was determination, but not outright feminism. She said, “So these are things I'm like, disgusting. This is not what Islam is about. And I don't believe in it and I don't live my life like that. Am I feminist if I said no, this is not right? Cause I don't know enough about the title, I don't give it to myself. I'm like - I'm a Muslim woman. I'm a Muslim who's living this life to please Allah and to live ... within the potential Allah created me for, and that is unlimited. I don't know what it is. Whether I'm a man or woman, it doesn't matter. I'm a mother of course, I'm a wife. I still have responsibilities in that frame, but it doesn't limit me from anything else.” Kaltun also saw the solution for all of this misogyny in Islam and was upset by the trend she saw in the youth, “What hurts me, like when you ask me if I'm a feminist, what I see is young Muslim women who took the idea of feminism from not an Islamic perspective. And they take that, and they try to apply it to Islam, like feminism is giving us the value. When if we started with Islam, then we would've seen how it ... I wish I could give them that value that has already being given...”

### **Jamillah Karim**

Unlike Krausen, Alwani, Prime and Karani, Jamillah Karim and Shehnaz Karim either used the term feminism as was necessary or redefined it to fit their own interpretation. I had heard Jamillah Karim use the word feminism in a talk at the Daybreak Literary Conference in 2017, so I asked her about that. She said, “It is, because ... because that talk that I give, I have

different versions of that talk and in some of them I don't talk about feminism and when I'm just ... when I'm giving a talk like I gave at the Community Life Forward, that was the Warith Deen Mohammed one, I don't bring up the word.” In Jamillah’s situation, when the audience would benefit from the word, she used it and when they would be disturbed by it, she did not. She admitted to not having read all of the literature around feminism but expressed concern that feminism in and of itself was not the cure that Muslims needed. She said, “We can’t be liberated without them (men).” which was a thought that was connected to bell hooks’s critique of second wave feminism and her refusal to throw black men further under the bus than they already were (hooks, 2000).

### **Shehnaz Karim**

Shehnaz Karim was willing to describe herself as a ‘true feminist’ but she differentiated that from the feminism that was anti-men. She used to use the term more because she wanted to “take that whole thing back for ourselves.” But she said that feminism was often anti-religion and things were “just more complicated now.” She said, “feminists now have a bad association in my own community – even with my own husband.” She described his negativity toward the term feminism and by default feminists; “Like in his mind, it's some of those people who are very, like some of those scholars who are like, “Oh, women should be leading men in prayer,” and that whole kind of thing like that. He associates feminism with women who would think that men are all just terrible like all of them are just awful. Even though, like he does a lot of counseling of couples and stuff like that, so he recognizes that there are really bad issues that men have really oppressed women, like he talks about that but for some reason that word feminism is associated with a very extreme reaction to that patriarchy. I think some of it has to do with the fact that he's from Tunisia and that the feminism as it was espoused by women there

was very anti-men and very anti-religion. Really putting down people of religion and really seeing hijab as anti-feminist, so that's kind of there.” For S. Karim, she would be willing to use the word if she thought the recipient of the word would be influenced positively, “I just try to read the person in front of me, so I make sure it really would be a positive thing for that person to hear.” In the end she is concerned with her audience’s faith and connection to Islam, and like her colleagues, she believed that Islam offered them that better than any other movement.

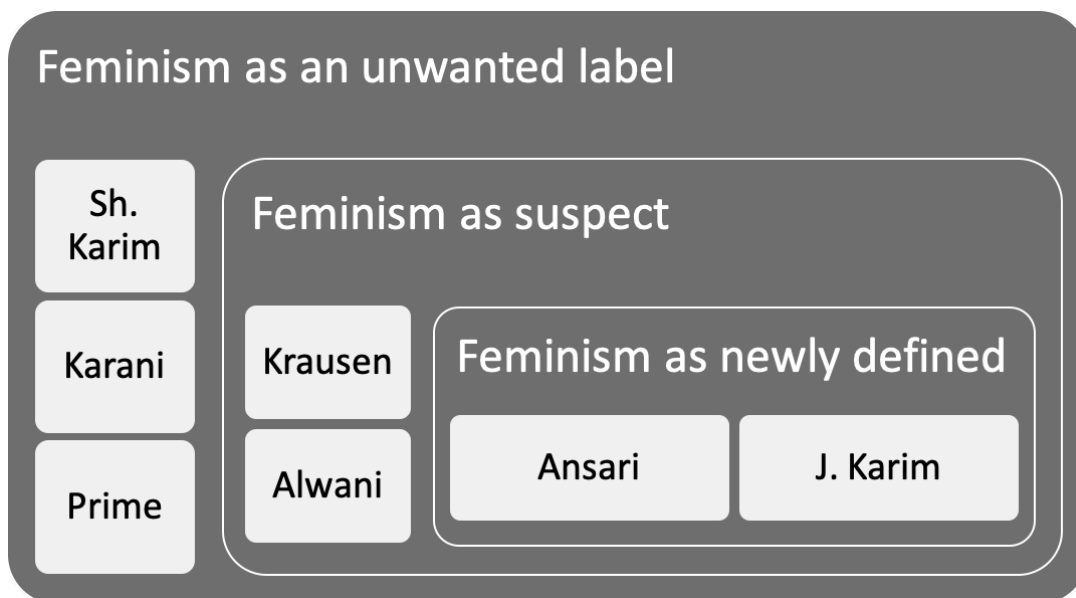
### **Zaynab Ansari**

Ansari was the only teacher-leader who expressed some interest in feminism. She said, “I think just the idea of feminism itself has been really unfairly maligned. There used to be a time when I would have been extremely reluctant to have identified in any way, shape, or form as a feminist. But I do find something about ... And I'll tell you for me it's kind of a more personal take on it, that I found myself in the wake of my husband's passing, may God rest his soul, that it was actually sort of certain genres of feminist writing that I looked at that I actually found sort of empowering and reassuring in a way that I didn't before, because I was kind of desperately looking for a way to find myself again in the midst of that ... losing that identity as a wife. So, there's this Nigerian author. I'm sure you've heard of her. And she has a little booklet called *Why we should all be Feminists*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. And I hope I'm not mispronouncing her name. And I'm looking at this, and it's kind of like fresh eyes, and I'm saying ... There are so many things in here that she says that I've actually heard growing up as being part of the Islamic view of women. So, it bothers me when I see this kind of knee jerk reaction amongst Muslims to the idea of feminism.” Though she gained an appreciation of feminism with Adichie’s book, it was because of the connection of feminist views to Islamic views, not a vantage point of feminism as a cure for any Islamic concept or worldview.

This was not to say that she had suddenly become fully comfortable with the label, however. She mentioned the complicated problem of being ostracized if she was suspected of holding to a feminist philosophy. She ruminated about Phyllis Schlafly, and how she used the privileges of the women’s movement to fight the Equal Rights Amendment. She recognized that it was Schlafly’s privilege as a white woman of means, who could travel freely, had child care etc... but yet she fought against that which gave her the privilege and seemed incapable of making that connection. These ruminations brought her back to herself and she said firmly “If I’m really being honest to myself, then yeah, it absolutely is sort of a form of feminism.”

### **Feminism Summary**

The teacher-leaders in my study were not interested in feminism as a source of relief from oppression. Even Zaynab Ansari, the closest to identifying as a feminist, only did so in the context of how well her readings fit into her view of Islamic understandings about womanhood and women’s lives. They recognized misogyny and sexism, but looked to Islam as the cure, not feminism.



*Figure 12.* Feminism was not a welcome label for any, suspected as defined by feminists for four, but accepted as a concept if redefined by two.

### **Digital Religion**

Digital religion “does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice,” (Campbell, 2012, p. 1) The seven women I studied used social media, websites, learning platforms and other online platforms to reach their audiences and followers.

#### **Ieasha Prime**

My participants attitudes toward digital space were varied. Ieasha Prime recognized a number of benefits of online religion. Teachings could reach a wider audience, and heavy topics could be learned piecemeal, or reviewed as often as necessary. She said, “Well, of course because you're able to reach a wider audience, and the other thing is that when it's not live, sometimes when it's live, it's spitfire, do you know what I mean?” Prime recognized the benefit of the recorded lecture for students as well, “And it's a lot to digest all in a moment, but what happens is that once something is online, and it's recorded, you can go back to it. We know a lot of lectures is like, ‘I need to hear that again. I need to understand that again,’ and so what it does is allow for people to sit with the knowledge a little bit longer. They can say, ‘You know what? I missed that,’ or, ‘I didn't understand that,’ and they can rewind it and go back, and so it becomes almost like a living book in a lot of ways.”

She said that she began giving classes online when she was moving around and her students did not want to stop taking classes, “We all travel and live life, there are some students that you leave behind, especially sometimes in areas where they really feel like there is no other female teacher, and so giving them access and assistance as well, I think that helps.” Online access allowed her students to continue their religious growth. It shaped their practice as they

were able to access Islamic knowledge and continue their relationship with Prime using a very simple access point.

But Prime pointed out another, precarious aspect of online religious learning and leadership. She said about online teaching, “Without realizing it we have a certain *suhba* [intimate companionship] with them that they don’t necessarily have with us. And so ... there's many cases, many times, a lot of familiarity that happens, and a lot of times, people feel closer or feel entitled to know some of the details of people's personal lives because they are in *suhba* with them, although the person who's speaking is not necessarily in *suhba* with them. So, there's a familiarity that people have or an entitlement that people have about their personal life that those lines get blurred, and that can create a multitude of challenges. Cause that's a ... that word has a lot of spiritual meaning, and so well, I think about, for example, many of these people, we have been invited into their homes. Some of us are educating their children, and we don't even know their children, but their children know us. Her children have met me, but I do not know them.” This new style of relationships deserved to be pondered in order to consider the ramifications. “You know? And there's a particular sister, Allah bless her forever, she came up to me and was telling me her daughter ... went to sleep to a particular lecture I gave. And I was like, ‘Ya Allah...’”

Ieasha was describing the one-sided relationship that occurred when a student listened and watched from her side of the screen. She saw the teacher, but the teacher did not see her. The student may feel close and even entitled, she may talk about her teacher and elevate her in the house, but the teacher may not ever have met her – neither in person, nor online. This was a unique relationship to online religion, one that lends itself to further thought and research. She

said, “We have been invited into their homes, but they have not been invited into ours.” She was concerned about this one-sided suhba or intimacy.

### **Zaynab Ansari**

Zaynab Ansari credited her notoriety to an online website that asked her to write for them in 2004. She had been back in the USA for four years, and the invitation came couched not in a serious request for religious teaching but as a lightweight effort to engage her work; “Look, you can be the Muslim version of Dear Abby.” the recruiter said to her. This was online and introduced Zaynab to the world of online forums, comments under articles and blogs, and the difficulty of that exposure. But she persevered and later spread her wings when she chose Muslim Matters as the platform to publish her article about spiritual abuse. We will discuss the actual article in the section about publications, but for now the significance of the platform cannot be underestimated.

Ansari’s attitude toward the online environment was that it was the reason for her leadership. She said, “I’d say it [her foray into leadership] was probably a lot of that online activity. And then I was doing some teaching online. And then that kind of led to being invited to different settings here and there, whether it was the MSA [Muslim Student Association] or some of these national conferences. And I just think the novelty of a woman that is not just willing to write about things online, but also willing to show up and stand in public and speak and deal with mixed audiences. For a lot of people, it was just this really novel thing. So, I think that was kind of part of it, just the novelty of the situation. And then of course, I think the biographical part is also really, really interesting. And this is where I really want to give the credit to my parents. I mean, even though I wasn’t able to go as far as I would have liked to in my studies, just the fact that I went ... I lived where I lived at the time that I did is also really

unique, *mashallah*. And so I think that's probably it. And then also the ... again, the online piece, because it kind of allows you to reach people. And I think there's an article I did for Muslim Matters a couple years back, and that kind of garnered some interest because I was addressing a topic that was a little bit sort of taboo, this idea of spiritual abuse. So ... Yeah. So that ... Again, it's not because I possess any sort of great in-depth training or whatever. It's just that Allah has been very kind and people ... By and large people are very kind and receptive, too.” So, though she recognized that her education was important, she underlined the effect of online opportunities to reach people – to be seen. The invitations to larger conferences came not only because she had a solid Islamic sciences background, but also because she had entered the online world of religion.

### **Kaltun Karani**

Karani was intentional about what she posted online and appreciated the freedom that online classes afforded her. She had done some Facebook live classes and after she had her recent baby turned to online classes as the only way she could easily keep in touch with her students. She recorded seven sessions in a row and graded her classes a great success. She was over her fear of awkwardness with online work, and now relied on it to stay connected during the times she needed to spend more time at home with family. She said, “And I wanted to do it online, but I couldn't do anything online. I just felt like I can't even put myself out there, I can't even say ‘Hey this is gonna be valuable to you,’ then just one day I was like, ‘Tomorrow I'm gonna do it,’ I wrote down what I was going to do, and I did seven sessions that were consecutive, and it was a great success. I felt so natural, I felt like ... this was my passion, that I was just speaking.” She preferred live online teaching to anything that needed to be recorded and then edited. She was excited about the possibilities of social media and hoped to use it very



intentionally in the coming months. She added, “the legitimate teachers cannot afford to not be on the internet.”

### **Jamillah Karim**

Jamillah Karim used the internet to start her blog, and this interaction was an important turning point for her. She recognized the connection and opportunity of her blog, but she was especially enthusiastic about the opportunity availed to her on WhatsApp and some online classes she was participating in. She said, “... I think my leadership comes out in the posts that I send. And especially because ... it's not a ... it's not a very heavy posting - a lot of people post and not a lot of women, and not a lot of women my age. I do feel like ... yeah, I feel like I feel more comfortable to post than others, and especially women. So, I think ... I think that's kinda how I lead. I do.” So, she used her place on the WhatsApp thread, among her sisters and brothers in the tariqa, to lead and influence thought. She also used her position in class to lead, she said, “I am very active in a class where ... it's led by a brother who's going over one of the texts of sheikh Ibrahim Niass. But every once in a while, we'll talk about something else... like two or three classes ago, one of the brothers asked how the women would respond to the *Hur al-ayn* [otherworldly (implied to be female) creatures of paradise] verse. And I was quiet at first, because there was another sister on the call and she didn't say anything and I said, ‘Well, you all know that I'm really happy to speak on this topic, but first, let me let her speak.’ And then she finally spoke up and she made a few comments.”

Jamillah used the online environment to give her female colleagues opportunity, before she took it herself. Then she answered, and used the opportunity to be a thought leader, “I think about that in two ways. He wanted to know how I feel about the *hur al-ayn* and also generally, which Quranic verses about paradise that inspired me the most. But I love, I love that because,

as I said, there's two ways I wanted to answer that. First from more of an academic way and then others are like a personal, which ones resonate.” In order to present an academic discussion, she decided to quote Amina Wadud. This was a precarious decision because her reputation as a feminist precedes her could easily sway the conversation or just dismiss whatever J. Karim was about to say. She explained, “And then I actually shared about Amina Wadud and ... and again, I wouldn't ... well, I can say I wouldn't normally, intentionally write about Amana Wadud, like I wouldn't reference her like in a blog or a speech, but this is like a more intimate class, it's about ten people. So, I went ahead, and it was just the truth, I was just being honest, like that's what came to mind. I think it's important to recognize people for the work, her work, for honoring women. So, I was recognizing her for her work and so I shared her perspective with them about the Quran, especially speaking to patriarchal men and how it's going to use the references that allude, that resonate with them.” She then moved from an academic point to a very personal story, teaching and demonstrating women's issues and challenges while telling her dream of paradisi, “Before Sheikh Mahi, who we had a lot of access to as women, but before him, when I was in those *rihla deen* [religious retreat] intensive spaces, you really didn't have that much contact with the *shuyukh* [plural for sheikh] or not as much as the men. And so, I said, ‘For me, like paradise ... I imagine being with the shuyukh in paradise.’ And I said, ‘You don't have it gender-bound or anything right there.’” Jamillah Karim was pleased that she had been able to communicate a message about gender issues and women's struggles within the online environment, without any negative results. It was a true teaching moment and one she looked forward to repeating.

**Zainab Alwani**

Zainab Alwani viewed social media as a group of tools. She was active on WhatsApp, had a personal page on Facebook and her videos were prevalent on YouTube, though uploaded by other organizations. She did participate in a small email list where she could send out articles and other motivational messages, but she mentioned that she was without an assistant and therefore did not have time to use the tools effectively. She summed it up in this way; “It's time-consuming. And I don't have that luxury of time. At the same time, you have to be there answering the questions and people and how they, whatever is there, so you have to be ... It's like I feel that I need maybe a teen to work on this.”

**Halima Krausen**

Krausen, on the other hand, was suspect of online interaction. She said, “I don't speak to cameras” and by that meant that the live interactions and reactions of her students were a crucial part of learning for her. She told of a story when she did agree to online *khutba* [sermon] styled talks, “One of the most embarrassing situations was in London when the Radical Middle Way, when they invited me to do, what did they call it ... some five minutes, mini khutba thingy they did online, and there was a cameraman, and there was me, and he said, ‘Now say something.’ I can't do that. I ended up saying to him, ‘No, at least pretend you are an audience so I can talk to you.’ No, I'm speaking to people, and if I don't see the people, then why? I will see people's reactions. Right I mean, I will talk to the ones. I'm not just presenting myself to whoever is listening, but I am trying to talk to people. Are they reacting? What are the questions? And it's interactive. I don't like to lecture very often. As for presenting a longer kind of thought, of course you have to kind of write it up and present it in logical form and things like that, but in general, this is not, if it is not followed with a discussion, then ... I don't like those formats

where, they call it the wisecracking competition of people comparing papers, and then they have two questions after each.” She said that all online learning was missing a critical piece; human interaction. She also criticized the “YouTube preacher” as being a one-way type of preacher, very unlike the Prophet of Islam, who called to a straight path but was open to human experience on that path. Though she spoke without enthusiasm about online interactions, she had used email for years to disseminate weekly Friday sermons to interested readers.

### **Shehnaz Karim**

Shehnaz Karim recognized the power of social media and online sources, but she was not always willing to engage with them. She ran the organization’s Facebook page and Instagram page, though she did not have her own account on either of those platforms. Her talks were recorded at the mosque and uploaded to YouTube, and still, she was not in charge of that.

Recently, however, someone wrote an article that criticized Muslims for “period shaming”, and she tried to push a number of people to respond, but no one was willing, so she herself came forward and did her first Facebook Live to talk about the spirituality of menstruation. She said, “I think it's like a crucial juncture that we're at now because Muslim women, they're very visible online, in social media, Muslim women in general. I see lot of women in general who are using their social media to claim to be leaders; to claim to be inspiring other women. I'm sure that's coming from a good place, but sometimes, I question it, ‘What is it that you're leading other women to?’ Then, I think that at a certain point, we're going to have to ask ourselves why we stepped away from that? Why are we shy to engage with that? Then, if we're going to have any reach and we're going to have any say, I guess in the public discourse around what it is to be a Muslim woman, then we have to be present because it's generally those women who are not ... I guess I really don't know. I am asking myself that question that does

change come about just through dedicating yourself to like ten people in your own community who'll listen to you and that the bigger change, the bigger spokespeople have to speak to a large audience, but the rest of us should be just trying to focus on actually making an impact on the individual lives of people?"

S. Karim changed her mind about this and a few months later said, "Yeah, definitely. I'm thinking about it in terms of making sure that there are women, you know, speaking in a serious way and teaching in a committed and serious and regular way about some of the classic or foundational aspects of Islam, but using a language that can connect to people in our time and using, you know, examples my teachers have given me of practical ways to express and apply our faith and it's important to be like a player in that scene because there aren't enough right now. And that's the concern that so many women and men have raised, that we don't see enough. So right now it is a matter of just being present, at least, to contribute to some kind of renaissance so that when people are searching online, there are enough people to catch them in that, to lift them up so that they don't fall into... and connect to each other and to really make sure there is a healthy presence of women speaking to both men and women. And people go online to look for that so to make sure that they can find what they might be looking for." She said that people were going online to look for scholars and guides, and that it was important for women to be available online so that people looking could find them. She said, "So there isn't an absence of the women's voice, or there aren't just so few that it could be missed."

### **Digital Religion Summary**

All of the women found themselves online whether they liked it (Karani) or not (Krausen). They had engaged in some deep thought about the implications of online relationships (Prime), and the effects of online access (everyone). Shehnaz's attitude toward

online activity was changing and developing when we met, and she was newly hoping to use digital tools to further her life mission.

### **Loneliness**

#### **A Pioneer**

Jamillah Karim described the feeling of being alone in her field as being a pioneer. She said, “I think of it more as a pioneer. I guess, when you think about loneliness, I think about ... maybe there’s some rejection or like a struggle there. So, I wouldn’t associate it with that.” She said she had grown into her role. “My friend described it, she was saying how I’d evolved and I’m really holding that stage, is how I think she described it. But anyway, mashallah, mashallah.” She talked about receiving enthusiasm and love from many different communities. “So, I guess I don’t feel as lonely, but I was going to say, even when I was at RIS, I wouldn’t even describe it that way because I was ... I was ... I’ve always been loved, admired, mashallah, but you know I would say ... probably because of my community too. Having those models in my community, having a mentor like Tabbiyah Taylor and from the beginning, even when I was in high school doing those *taqwa* [God consciousness] commentary talks, you know, just always encouraging, praising, showing their pride. And so when I did RIS, it was the first community that was close [similar] to the Warith Deen Mohammed community that I grew up in. It was a lot of, it was a lot of Somali, East-African women in that audience. And I got overwhelming love and support from them, but I also saw there was a thirst for woman speakers from that... But so, I would say, because there’s just so much love and support, even when I was with the, with the South Asian women, who probably express their love and admiration a different kind of way ... even then, I remember they were so happy. When I was going to a mosque and wanted to ask to

interview them, they were just so happy to find out that I was working on my Ph.D.” She felt alone, but loved.

### **Longing**

Ieasha Prime expressed a need for colleagues with whom she could sit with, discuss detailed points of scholarship, and create a camaraderie, “I think that happens on fairly regular basis, but I don't live in an area where there are a lot of other women teaching. Sometimes, I don't necessarily want to be a teacher. I just want to go sit in another woman's class, and then there is not a group of teachers sometimes. That can create a certain loneliness because ... there's a certain camaraderie you have with your students, but then there's another company of your colleagues of work that you can discuss some of those challenges with. Women you want to work out certain ideas with, certain concepts with. There are several texts, certain *ahadith* [plural form of hadith] that I would love to sit down on a regular basis over coffee and chat with other women who are in this work and really delve into them. And so not having that in America is ... challenging.”

She also described feelings of longing for missing practices, especially song and singing, “It's interesting because I come from a teaching that embraces dhikr and living in the area that I am, that's not always something that is ... looked at in a positive light... And so that definitely creates a longing for other times and places where that was just the norm, and I like to sing, to be honest with you, I love to sing *nashīd* [hymn-styled religious songs]. I love singing in general. I'd love to sing with other groups of women who ... yeah. I love to sing, especially, to be honest with you, in English. Yes, and to be honest, because that was something that was very much a part of my religious life, spiritual life growing up as an African American, and many of those songs are based upon *tawhīd* [oneness or uniqueness of God], a lot of what they call Negro spirituals.

Many of them were based upon tawhīd. It's not something ... that's always something seen as, once you become Muslim, something you must put aside and put away, and I don't have that sentiment. That's not the sentiment I have. I have very ... vivid memories of watching my mother and my grandfather talk about the song, 'Give me that old time religion, give me that old time religion. If it's good enough for Abraham, then it's good enough for me!' You know, and things were like, things that were very like, they actually had a lot to do with my conversion as well, so there's loneliness around that." Prime felt a longing for a community of practice.

Women she could discuss religious issues with, and women she could sing and worship with.

Women who would not be her students, but rather her friends.

### **Lone Voice**

Zaynab Ansari expressed a loneliness of view point. She remembered a time when she was the only woman invited to conferences, etc... and was grateful that this was changing, but very aware that there was still much work to do. "You know, there was definitely a time I'd say where I did feel kind of ... (alone). Because there were retreats and events I'd be invited to and I'd be the only female teacher. It's not ... Fortunately it's not like that ... Well, at least the places I'm invited to. I am grateful that with some of the bigger conferences I go to, that the organizers have actually started to add more female speakers to the roster. So I don't feel as alone as I used to. But still there is that sense of loneliness there, and it's a loneliness from the perspective of ... In these ... Say the WhatsApp groups. So, in these forums that purport to bring together scholars and ulama ... you almost feel like that lone voice in the wilderness. And that really bothers me. I almost feel like we're just speaking two entirely different languages. And I would say that kind of loneliness maybe owes more to a kind of disconnect that I feel between myself and these scholars. And also the fact that I can feel that they're so far removed from a lot of the issues and



concerns that people on the ground are dealing with, especially women.” Zaynab Ansari saw loneliness in a lack of ability to connect and agree on issues and viewpoints. She was pleased that there were more women speaking at the large conferences, but did not see that affecting male attitudes, or even awareness, about women’s lived realities.

### **Alone**

Zainab Alwani felt the lack of women at conferences and so she pro-actively made it a point to address the problem. She said, “Indeed, it's like every time you go, as you know... [you may be alone]. In fact, you will find me with Zaytuna (college), with Medina (Institute), with Adam's (Center) and with others, because I believe all of them are doing good and I try to support all of them.” Alwani was invited to these different spaces, sometimes alone and sometimes alongside one other woman and she objected. “So I really spoke about it...and I told them that we need more women to be involved, because most of the time, even in terms of organization, women will be maybe involved in that legwork more than scholarly work. So that's why, with Medina Institute for example, for a long time I was the only one teaching. Adam's [another institution] maybe we have counseling, we have teaching, other education, other fields. But not Islamic studies. So, alhamdulillah now, we have of course more women like you and so many other scholars are, alhamdullilah, rising. So, this is something we're blessed to have all of you involved. But yes, a few years ago, I was...alone.” Alwani did not feel a sense of loneliness, but rather a dearth of other women in the field. She was happy to see more women entering the speaking circuit, and the Islamic teaching field, but still felt there were too few.

S. Karim addressed her own loneliness in the field as the state of being without old friends, “Loneliness, yeah, it's very lonely sometimes. I think about that song about the loneliness of a dā`iya [teacher-leader]. But, yeah, it's lonely because you can't really ... Like not

everybody has been through the same experience that you went through and I think maybe also I'm an introvert anyway and then, I'm not really a very social person, so I still think that my friends are the people I knew in Syria. That's it for me. I recently met some people, who I really connected with well and they are from Syria. They're Syrian refugee women and they just took me back to that way of interacting, it's just so natural, like they've been through so many 'tragedies,' but they're just such loving people. They're so affectionate.”

S. Karim hoped to gift the women in her community the depth of friendships and sisterhood that she had experienced as a young student. “I'm struggling to create a sense of that sisterhood in my community. It must be possible, but I don't know if it's affected by the presence of men in the community like because they're men as well in the community, there's a broader sense of community... I found there's really healthy interactions between men and women. They're very respectful. They're very limited. Obviously, I think also because I'm there and I'm very stern looking and people don't want to do anything that I would take them aside afterwards and talk to them about... A lot of women are lonely. It wouldn't just be like somebody who's a *dā`iya* (teacher-leader). A lot of people are lonely. They're at home, raising their kids. They feel like nobody checks in on them. Yeah that's like a big thing. I want to start a monthly event, so I want to do the *jalsa `ibada* [worship session] just for women. Then, I also want to start a monthly event, just gathering women, just to socialize, just to talk. There's no actual *`ibada* [worship], just really focusing on hearing each other because we even have the *dā`iya* that I told you about, the elderly woman, well, she came one day and she got really mad at us because she had a stroke and then she had surgery and she was like, ‘You guys never even checked in on me, you knew I was sick.’ She just gave it to us. I feel like people of all ages, we need to just make sure that we gather them, and they can talk about whatever is going on. We'll eat together before

a halaqa or well, obviously we ate together almost every day in Ramadan. It's so intense, like you have to eat really quickly, get ready for the tarawīh [evening prayers]. Someone like an older person, a lonely mom, it takes time for them to open up and tell you, 'This is what I'm worried about, this is what I'm going through, this is what happened when I went to the doctor and I feel worried about my health,' or whatever. I just want to figure out ways to give people that time that they need, women especially."

S. Karim also reflected on her inability to be vulnerable with followers and team members, and also the way she dealt with personal loneliness, "Totally, I feel that I can't be open. I can be open with someone like [an old friend] or anybody from that time when I was just a kid because they know the real me. They know I was like a mess when I came to Syria. They know everything about me. They knew me at my lowest point. Then they would never judge me also, so that kind of relationship, I don't think that it's very easy to come by. I think that even when you're working with people, even when those people are not technically your students, but they're your team, they're your volunteers, if you start to show that you're crumbling in their mind, in their eyes, then it affects their energy. I think that sometimes the way that they respond (to seeing loneliness or vulnerability) is in a way that I don't even welcome necessarily, it's like kind of ... I know that sounds really arrogant, but if I'm feeling really tired or I'm feeling like I'm lonely, I would love for somebody to pray for me and maybe that's just weird, but I don't really want them to be like, 'Oh, I feel sorry for you,' or 'Poor you, your husband is always busy,' but I'm happy about that. I want my life to be like that, but ... I don't know what I'm asking for, I don't really know. That thing of just being able to pick up the phone, it's so important. I think I need to do that more just to call somebody, like [an old friend] or whoever. I used to feel so

much better just calling. I think we all feel like we don't want to do that to our teachers, now, like we don't want to call them up and tell them, 'I feel really down.'”

S. Karim craved the time and the ability to call an old friend or a teacher but felt she would be disturbing them. She also thought that her concerns were trivial and that she should be able to manage her problems and issues. She saw standing alone as a necessary requirement at this stage of her development. “You're supposed to be out there in the field, like come on, your time is done. There are other people, who need that attention. I also think I've been given all the tools, like okay, go and read *Surat al-Baqara* [chapter in the Quran]. You will feel fine and I really believe that. I think that that's the ultimate. I think I'm just really lazy in a lot of ways and I just need to do that more. Even when I feel lonely, I feel like it's just a bit of an illusion because I know I'll feel better if I just really talk to Allah. At this point, you have to do that. I mean when am I going to start doing that? I'm almost 40. He gave me everything. It's not really logical for me to still be using the language of other people who are *masakīn* [spiritually impoverished]. They're just starting out on their path. They don't have that richness that I have. Even if I were to just pull myself back into time and memories, I'll feel better, even just thinking of all the wonderful things that have happened to me, so I think it's just really learning to invest those things because I'm an introvert anyway, so I don't really crave company in that way.”

S. Karim talked about the importance of choosing words carefully when talking to herself about her feelings, “When I find myself saying, ‘Oh, I'm lonely,’ and I stopped doing that. I went through a period, where I was saying that to myself a lot because my husband wasn't around. He's like in Montreal all the time, teaching there and everything. I found myself using that language. And once he said to me, you're lonely, but you have Allah. Yeah, I was annoyed with him for that answer at the beginning, but I was like, ‘Yeah, you know that makes a lot of

sense because I always craved this life and I always wanted to have a life, where really I would find that solace in talking to Allah and reading from His book.' Alhamdulillah, I have everything I need. I should be careful about borrowing somebody else's language to deal with my problem that may not be that problem. In reality, it's a different problem that I have." S. Karim called on her relationship with God to correct her feelings of loneliness or aloneness. She also hoped to create that community for the women around her so that they would not suffer in ways that she had. She had community with the women she had learned with in Syria, but they did not live near her and were not always accessible. Hence her need to seek solace in worship and communion with God.

Kaltun Karani talked about how the nature of the job, the nature of commitment, was lonely and resulted in her being alone. "It is a lonely job." She continued, "I'm comfortable being alone, but at the same time ... when I started teaching, when I started going to study, my friends were like the first to say, 'You're not available to hang out.' And I remember my best friends, they were like my sisters. I had to say, 'You guys, I'm committed to this, so if you guys want me to be included, please meet on days where I can.'" She planned her days so that she could be with her friends when they were together, "I had to make that time. But they still say Kaltun is just gone a lot, Kaltun is gone a lot. Even now, like when I started my master's, I remember a friend of mine said to me 'You're just not available anymore.' And it was said because I was like I want to be available, I want to be friends, I want to hang out, I enjoy these things. But you're committed to things and you're like this is for a bigger potential, this is for a bigger path in life. I've missed all these weddings this year, and I love to party and go to weddings... And then you become...you lose people. And that still makes me sad. I'm still, overcoming it. But I made this du`a the other day, *wallahi* [I swear by God] it was this week, I

was thinking out loud like You created me to be this person who loves people and who connects with people, let me do that in a way where I share what's valuable and take care of my lonely heart when I do get lonely.” Karani felt loneliness and aloneness, but it did not lessen her commitment to the work.

Halima Krausen recognized that the nature of the work, of any unusual path, was lonely, and she coped by remembering her place in the world, “Yes, there is some loneliness, and I think an unusual path is a very lonely path. I can only warn everybody. And sometimes, this is really poorly done, and then in one of these, in a time when I was very kind of, yeah, really sad about being lonely, I remembered that the Boss is One, so how lonely would He be? And, yeah, well, it doesn't necessarily, it doesn't make me kind of feel better in the sense of feel well effect or something, but it gives meaning to my feeling of loneliness, and I think that matters a lot.” She held a unique place in the world – there were very few other women like her; she was alone.

### **Loneliness Summary**

Zaynab Ansari, Zainab Alwani, and Jamillah Karim all spoke to the problem of being the lone voice, or the only woman at an event. Ansari added to that the feeling that most male scholars had missed the boat on understanding women's issues.

Ieasha Prime, Halima Krausen, Kaltun Karani, and Shehnaz Karim spoke about the feeling of aloneness. The job itself brought loneliness in its lack of a community of practice, or just lack of sheer numbers of colleagues.

Shehnaz Karim, Ieasha Prime, and Kaltun Karani also reflected on the feeling of longing for earlier times, or missing practices or people who were important to them.

Everyone spoke honestly of their feelings, though no one allowed themselves to indulge in feelings of loneliness. The tone was matter of fact and realistic. It was part of the job, and they must deal with it and get on with it.

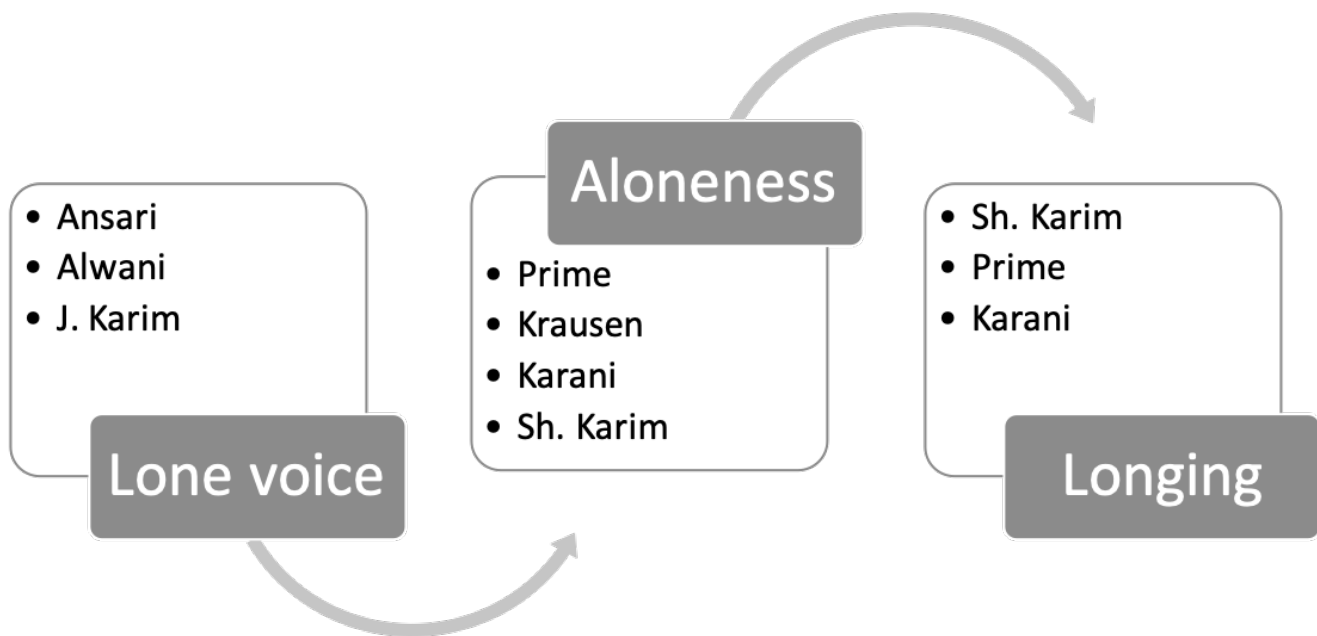


Figure 13. Loneliness continuum

### Netnographies

I did a one-month netnography of the seven participants' Facebook activity. Six of the seven women had an active Facebook account, and Shehnaz, the only one without a personal Facebook account, posted for her organization. The netnography was done in November, a political month in the USA, and I was curious as to how that might manifest in their posts. I also

Googled them and took note of the websites, videos, podcasts that mentioned them, articles written by them and articles written about them that came up on Google. Their social media platforms are listed in Table 4. The topics of their video presence are listed in Table 5 under the section dealing with their public lectures and see Appendix D for a list of the websites wherein they are mentioned as teacher or scholar. Their articles are dealt with in the publications section. In the following paragraphs I will describe each woman’s social media and website results separately and then summarize them at the end of the section.

Table 4. Social media presence

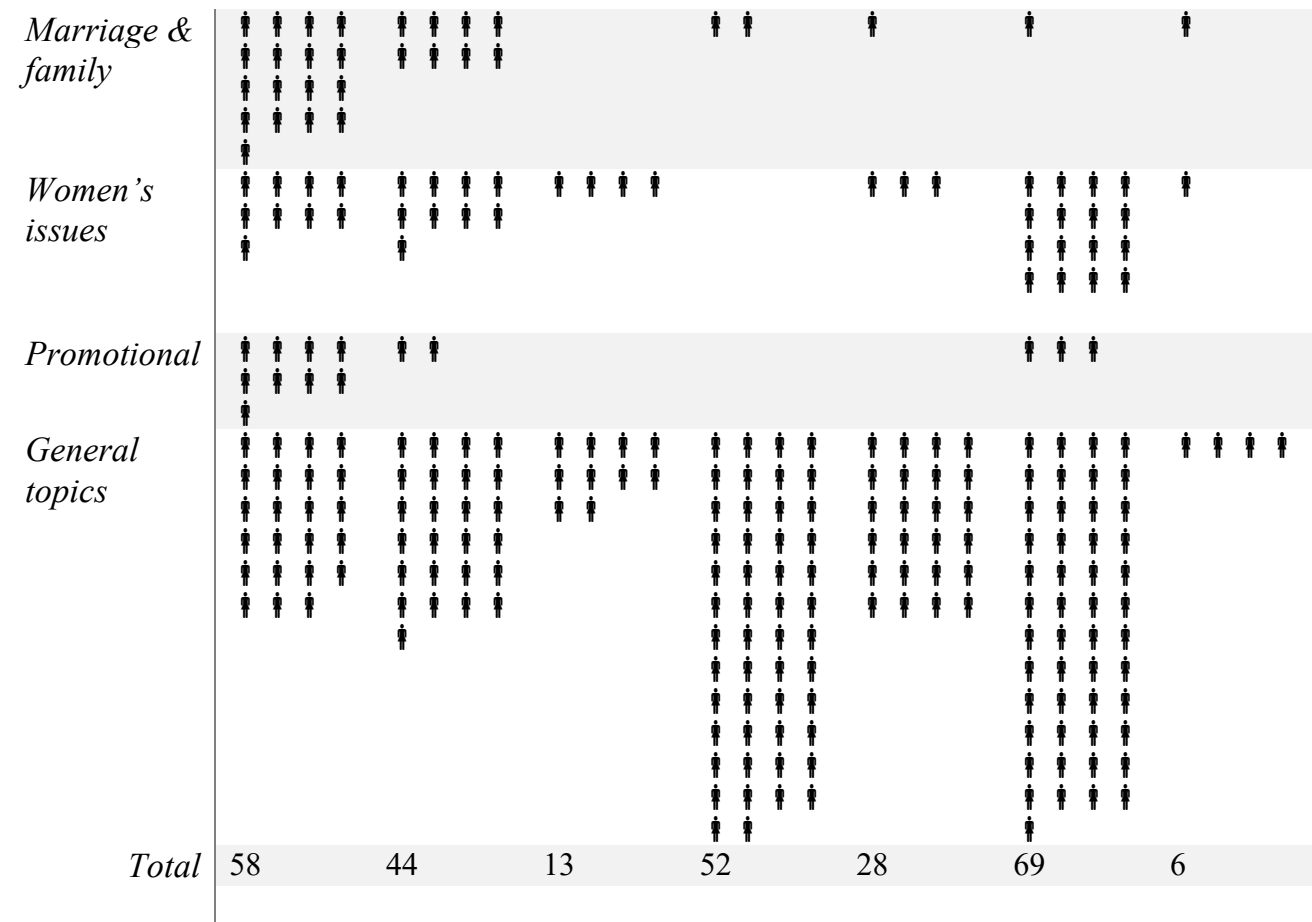
Platforms	Ansari	Alwani	J. Karim	S. Karim	Krausen	Prime	Karani
Facebook				(org)			
Instagram		(private)	(private)	(org)			
Twitter				(org)			
LinkedIn							
YouTube				(org)			
Personal website							
WhatsApp							
Other		Research Gate			Research Gate		Pinterest

Table 5.

Distribution of video topics

Video Topics	Ansari	Alwani	J. Karim	S. Karim	Krausen	Prime	Karani
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**Zaynab Ansari**

I found 58 videos of Ansari’s talks available online. Fifteen videos were about marriage, family and/or raising children, eight were promotional, and the rest were about Islamic studies topics such as fasting, *sīra* [biography of the Prophet], encouragement to work on becoming a better person, and short videos about ‘first women’ – historical Muslim women who were first at something (first martyr, first believer etc.).

She was a scholar/teacher for four organizations with websites that displayed her biography and picture in prideful place (See Appendix D).

She was active on Facebook. She did not have an account on Twitter or Instagram. She used WhatsApp as well and according to my observations, participated in group conversations in a serious, never frivolous manner.

During the month of November, she did not post much original material on her Facebook page. Instead, out of 29 posts, 21 were shares. A share is to take something you find interesting from another page and share it. In her case these shares were direct shares, so they did not include a context for why she was sharing. It was understood that the material was meaningful to her. Of the remaining 8 posts on her Facebook page, 3 were links to articles (not shared from another page, but a direct link), 3 were tags – meaning someone else had posted the material and tagged her so that it showed up on her page, and one was an original post. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 she wrote, “Why do people throw away their votes on independents?” to which she received 74 comments, some of which schooled her about the American political party system, and others of which agreed with her sentiments.

Of the shares, three were fundraisers, eight were about USA politics, two were about international politics, four were motivational, five had content related to religion, and two were marketing posts to announce an upcoming event. She did not engage with the comments left under her posts during the month of November, but I noticed in December that she posted a controversial article about the now-infamous French legal case against Tariq Ramadan<sup>14</sup>. Here she did engage with the comment section, and schooled her followers in appropriate forms of

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<sup>14</sup> The grandson of Hassan al-Banna was accused of rape and then the French government was accused of Islamophobic bias and abuse of a prisoner. Read more here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/tariq-ramadan-oxford-professor-facing-rape-charges-granted-conditional-release>

engagement, disagreement and argument. She scolded those who had used foul language after deleting their comments.

### **Kaltun Karani**

Kaltun was active on Instagram and Facebook. She had a YouTube channel, but it only had two videos posted. She used WhatsApp for communication and was not on Twitter. She was featured on nine websites, two of which belonged to her (Kaltunkarani.com/ and hikmaacademy.com). Two sites listed her as a teacher, two as a coach, two had advertisements about upcoming events, and one featured her bio without any explanation as to why it was there (See Appendix D for details).

There were many articles that quoted Kaltun Karani on the net because in 2011 her brother was accused of terrorism and deported. She spoke briefly about this period of time as a time of fear and sadness. She believed her brother to be innocent of his charges, but it was a difficult time. Other than those articles, however, Karani was not featured in articles that quoted her or referred to her.

Her activity on her personal Facebook page in the month of November was typical of other months. She posted or was tagged in 34 posts, the majority of which were very personal. Her personal posts seemed to be teaching by example. She very rarely shared articles or other posts without commenting, using the opportunity to frame the post to ensure understanding of her viewpoint. For example, she posted a video of a young girl learning how to dribble a soccer ball using a smart ball and a computer screen and said, “There is a serious problem when everything becomes virtual! There is more to soccer practice with a coach and a team than the ‘soccer skills..’” (Kaltun Karani, 2018). This is both social commentary and (seemingly) a direct message to her young students. She had one FB live in November where she talked about what to

do when feeling low, showing her vulnerable side. Throughout the month she was active in the comment sections of each post; responding to people and expanding discussions. She posted two ads for her own events. Though she had lived in three countries, her political posts were primarily about US issues. She had a long discussion about gun violence and gun laws, encouraged others to vote, and showed her support for Ilhan Omar (Somali American democratic state senator of MN). Only one of her posts was about foreign politics and that was about US involvement in Yemen and the ensuing hunger crisis.

Her videos on Youtube included a celebratory dinner for her organization Hikma Academy, and “Testimonial from Kaltun Karani”, “How I take advantage of the Arafah opportunity” and one about her son which had won a contest. She had one lecture that was framed with less of a personal overtone, “Islamic mindset #1: Why do we wear hijab?” and recently she was recorded speaking at ‘Ilmfest’ – a large conference in Minnesota - about empowering women.

### **Jamillah Karim**

Dr. Karim had a LinkedIn page, Twitter account, a personal Facebook page, and a YouTube channel. She was a regular contributor to Sapelo Square, an online gathering space that “aims to be the destination of all things Black and Muslim in the United States.” She had two active blogsites: “Hagar Lives” and “Race+Gender+Faith”.

There were at least 13 videos on YouTube of her lectures, though she only uploaded two to her channel. There were four recordings of talks she had done at conferences, seven were lectures from conferences and workshops affiliated with a university, and the rest were either uploaded talks she had done on her own, or recordings of smaller events.

Her bio was found at Huffington Post, and on random sites and places where she was a visiting speaker. There were book reviews, an interview and, interestingly, an article about her in Indonesian. She was a prolific writer with multiple blog posts at both of her websites, as well as articles at Sapelo Square, and in scholarly publications as well.

J. Karim was an active WhatsApp user. She posted regularly to a group thread where she was perceived as a group leader because of the quantity and substantive nature of her posts. She contributed to discussions. She also used WhatsApp to lead ritual readings of Quran and meditative praise in honor of the group's sheikh.

Jamillah Karim posted to her Facebook page four times in November. The first post was a poem for her "soul sister". She posted the poem along with a quote from Rumi, "Every single part of this world longs for its counterpart." (Jamillah Karim, 2018a). The second post was calling for her followers to sign a petition for the release of Dr. Nevron Askari<sup>15</sup> from prison (Jamillah Karim, 2018b). And the third was an advertisement for a public event and discussion of which she was going to be a speaker (Jamillah Karim, 2018c). She freely engaged in the discussion that ensued under the post about the poem, and was very open, vulnerable and loving toward the woman she posted the poem for.

The poem was part of a blog post at Hagar lives and she sent the poem to the group WhatsApp thread and to me as well. She used Facebook to drive traffic to her website, but she did not neglect the ensuing commentary of mutual affection below the post.

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<sup>15</sup> See this petition for more information: [https://petitions.moveon.org/sign/release-for-dr-askari?source=s.fb&r\\_hash=4ZwYUFX7&fbclid=IwAR2s5uq7TXRqrJmjLzdtMEx9gy-xuYEK79hLVHfIRSX0RhsbrV83J83kOa0](https://petitions.moveon.org/sign/release-for-dr-askari?source=s.fb&r_hash=4ZwYUFX7&fbclid=IwAR2s5uq7TXRqrJmjLzdtMEx9gy-xuYEK79hLVHfIRSX0RhsbrV83J83kOa0)

**Ieasha Prime**

Ieasha Prime had a rapid increase in online videos after her participation in the Women's March. There were no less than 69 videos and podcasts of her on YouTube, and that did not include playlists, videos at other sites, or podcasts not found on YouTube. Topics were about activism and activist topics such as racism and women's issues were mentioned no less than twenty times. Other topics included issues of belief, general topics, and promotional videos.

Prime's use of social media was minimal. Her student started her Facebook page, and a friend started the website that was under her name.

She was featured on at least 20 websites as a speaker (including ads) and there were at least 12 articles that either quoted her or were about her. She had published at Sapelo Square and she signed a letter on Muslim Matters, though she did not author it.

Prime's Facebook page in the month of November was busy, but it was mostly tags (a tag appears on a person's page when someone else posts something and 'tags' you). There were 30 posts, and only two of which were posted by Ieasha herself, and both of those were shares. She did not respond to the long discussions that ensued under the tags or the shares. Her two shares included one fundraiser for the funeral costs of a deceased Muslim leader (Ieasha Prime, 2018b), and a political share in favor of Ilhan Omar (during one of the the times she was being harshly attacked by the right wing for being a Muslim woman) (Ieasha Prime, 2018a).

Her website was updated to include upcoming events and included information about what Ieasha does as a public speaker, educational consultant, activist and fashion designer. There was a question and answer option, but it was private. Readers were invited to email [info@ieashprime.com](mailto:info@ieashprime.com) to ask any religious question they would like. Interested parties could

book a talk on the bookings page or read her bio on the about page. Neither her personal website, nor her organizations website (barakahinc.com) hosted a blog, however.

### **Halima Krausen**

Krausen's online footprint was in both German and English. She had a page on Researchgate, which was a platform similar to Facebook for researchers, a LinkedIn page and a personal Facebook page. She was not very active on Facebook but did use the messenger app associated with Facebook to communicate with me.

I found 28 videos of Halima Krausen, most of which were serious lectures. She had some pre-recorded short videos she had done with The Radical Middle Way, but when she mentioned these videos in our interview, she shook her head and said "Oh! Those were embarrassing." She asked the camera person to "pretend to listen" so that she could see him as an audience. It was the memory of this experience that underlined her "I don't speak to cameras" statement.

In an advertisement for a tour, Sheikha Halima was called, "Europe's leading Muslim woman scholar" (Radicalmiddleway, 2009). The Inclusive Mosque advertised that Halima Krausen would be leading the Friday prayer at an upcoming date (Inclusive Mosque Initiative, 2017). Many of her videos were in German, but she said that her intellectual language was English and this was because though her mother-tongue was German, when she was learning about Islam and thinking about other theological questions there had been very little available in German, so she did most of her learning in English. Hence much of her theological lectures and writings were in English.

In the month of November, Krausen posted on Facebook 15 times, nine of which were general shares, and eight were personal posts. Looking broadly at November and December,

many of her posts were interfaith posts, with Thanksgiving, Christmas, Kwanza, Diwali, and Hanukah all mentioned. She engaged with the followers who commented below the posts, regularly responding to them even if it was just to show she had read their comment.

Krausen's events/ lectures were advertised at a few websites, and there were eight different English articles or blogs that mentioned her or quoted her.

Significantly, she had a German Wikipedia page. In order to have a page on Wikipedia, the person in question must be 'notable,' the definition of which is tested by their contributions and judged by the staff at Wikipedia. She was the only woman in my study who had a Wikipedia page. The page included a short summary of her life, her publications, publications that wrote about her, and references for more information. She did not have an English Wikipedia page.

### **Zainab Alwani**

Zainab Alwani had been working in the field of religious leadership for years and her online footprint evidenced that. There were numerous playlists on YouTube with old videos and new videos of her lectures. She had articles and citations in Google Scholar, and there were articles about her in a general Google search, including a 'Scholar Spotlight' article by the British Omar Shahid (who runs a management organization for Muslim celebrities/influencers).

Her videos were serious and circled around themes of domestic issues, Quranic exegesis, principles of shari`a, and women's issues and histories. She also had promotions, short random recordings that she had done for different organizations, and interviews.

Zainab Alwani was a user of social media, but not heavily. She had a Researchgate page, a LinkedIn account, an inactive Facebook public figure page and a personal Facebook page. She had a personal website that included her biography, articles and publications, and an invitation to



support her Orphan Care project. She did not keep a blog. Her organization, “The Orphan Care Project,” worked to educate American institutions about Muslim children in foster care, raised awareness about the global orphan crisis and supported orphaned children. The organization also kept a website. Her personal website included information about this. Her bio was also found on about 12 other websites where she was listed as a scholar or teacher.

Most of her writing was academic and so did not appear on a general Google search. However, her use of academia.edu to upload some of her papers was a useful service for the community, because those articles showed up in a regular Google search, were free, and provided free and open access to that knowledge and information..

Her personal Facebook page had very little traffic and in November she posted only once to announce an upcoming event she would be speaking at (Zainab Alwani, 2018). Her profile picture on her inactive public page was of herself, but on her personal page, it was a picture of her father.

### **Shehnaz Karim**

Shehnaz Karim did not have any social media accounts in her name. During our interview she said that there was a plan for her to have her own Facebook page and podcast. Working with her organization they created a strategic plan for her to have personal social media accounts. She said this was the advice she had received from her team and other organizations. She does most of the posting for her organization’s Facebook and Instagram accounts, but all video was posted to the organization’s Facebook and YouTube accounts by someone else.

S. Karim had a number of series of lectures up on Youtube. Most of her classes at the mosque were recorded and posted. Her videos were posted on other channels as well, but they were primarily found on her organization’s channels. One of her lectures was posted by a non-

Muslim organization called Holistic Journeys. They were interested in healing and she had a video entitled “Healing the mind” which they posted on their channel (See Appendix D). Her videos were in English, but some were translated into French. An institute located in Stockholm also posted a talk by S. Karim. The title was translated into Swedish, but her talk remained in English without translation. There were no less than 40 videos or podcasts available on YouTube and elsewhere

She wrote a blog for her organization’s website and posted topics three times in 2018. There were also articles about activities she had participated in, and 14 websites had information about her, as a teacher and/or for an upcoming event. In 2017 and 2018, there were three articles that mentioned S. Karim or included her in the article in some way.

### **Summary of Netnographies**

The netnography showed that the women in my study were active online, but rarely because of their own volition. While everyone had an online footprint, few participated in their chosen neighborhoods regularly. Videos of their lectures were uploaded to random sites, and even the few who had personal channels did not update them. They were missing on sites that took note of notoriety, like Wikipedia, and none had active public figure pages on Facebook. Twitter, a social media site focused on conversation, was not used by any of the seven women. Jamillah Karim had a Twitter account, but she rarely posted. In general, they benefitted from the popularity generated by other people online but did not demonstrate a clear vision of online media usage. Shehnaz Karim and Iaesha Prime both expressed their intention to ‘do better’ online, and Jamillah Hakim was active on her blog. Other than that, the seven women in this study, though they had a fairly significant presence in a Google search, did not take control of that footprint for their personal missions.

### **Publications**

All seven teacher-leaders had published works, whether books, articles or blogs. The articles, blogs, and books carried clear and unique messaging for each teacher-leader. Unlike their videos, wherein topics were often determined by whomever had invited, recorded and posted their lecture, the messaging in their publications was controlled by them personally. As such, a clear stream of their mission and message was obvious. The following is an analysis based on the trajectory of the writings of each teacher-leader. I looked for trends in their writing, and progression of ideas over time.

#### **Zaynab Ansari**

These three articles: “Dr. Amina Wadud and the Progressive Muslims: Some Reflections of Women-Led Prayer” (Ansari, 2005), “Blurred Lines: Women, “Celebrity Shaykhs”, and Spiritual Abuse” (Ansari, 2015) , and Triple Consciousness: Islamic Institutions of Higher Education, Women and Sacred Law (Ansari, 2018) demonstrated Zaynab Ansari’s trajectory of publications.

Her 2005 article “Dr. Amina Wadud and the Progressive Muslims: Some Reflections of Women-Led Prayer” is a scathing critique of the Progressive Muslim Union of North America (PMUNA). Ansari clung to her traditional background and presented arguments around the spirituality of prayer. But what was most interesting in this article was the conflict of practice she faced toward the end of the article. While dismissing progressive solutions, she demonstrated an awareness of problematic interactions within mosque spaces. She began her argument with, “She [Amina Wadud] recently went on record as objecting to particular verses in the Quran that do not accord with her conception of universal justice and human rights.... Clearly Dr. Wadud approaches the Quran from a vantage point that conflicts with the well-established methodology of Islamic scholarship and exegesis of the Quran. Mainstream Sunni

and Shi'i scholars alike accept the principles of the universality, immutability, and applicability of the Quran edicts. Saying yes to the Quran is very much at the core of Muslim faith." (Ansari, 2005, para. 4 and para. 5). She continued, "It is important to be aware that Dr. Wadud has tampered with a core pillar of the faith: prayer." (Ansari, 2005, para. 9). She questioned the wisdom of even discussing female imamate and asked, "Is it wise to make the prayer a bone of contention among Muslims? The imam should be someone who can unite the congregation, not divide them. The issue of female imamate has the potential to divide rather than unite." (Ansari, 2005, para. 14). She brought the discussion back to piety, "Salat, or prayer, is about putting ourselves in front of God. It is an expression of piety, the humbling realization that in front of God, we are nothing. Prayer has to be examined from within a framework of dīn, not power relations, gender politics, or postmodernism." (Ansari, 2005, para. 14).

Toward the end of the article, her tone moved from one of harsh criticism to frank recognition of problems and even pleading to her colleagues for change, "The Progressive Muslims raise valid and relevant questions about women's issues, especially those pertaining to women's space in the mosque and gender relations...I believe that it is time that Muslim women reclaim their rights from within Islam... I too have experienced discrimination in the mosque... Finally, dear brothers, realize the impact of your words upon your listeners... When the Imam in the masjid harshly tells the women to sit in their own space, tells them to be quiet because their voice is a private part, tells them that he has to protect the men from them because, 'the worst rows are those nearest to the women,' honestly how do you think these sisters are going to feel? And who will they feel the most welcome with, the local Imam who humiliates them, or the progressives who greet them (literally) with open arms?" (Ansari, 2005, para. final).

Then, ten years later, in 2015, Ansari took on a serious issue in the Muslim community – spiritual abuse. Like 2005, she was able to see internal problems with clarity, but unlike 2005, she was now writing with confidence.

She began her article in a very traditional style, first with a verse from the Quran and then a hadith. She then launched into a discussion about her role as a female teacher and speaker “in the male-dominated field of ‘traditional Islam’.” She added, “I am simultaneously called upon to speak for the women in the audience, while defending the shari`a [Islamic legal] basis for my presence on stage.” (Ansari, 2015, para 1). She walked us through her growth as a leader, mentioning her role answering online questions around fiqh, theology and “every conceivable topic.” (Ansari, 2015, para 3). She then came to the point of the article and bemoaned the lack of ethics on the part of an unnamed sheikh and his interactions with his female students or followers, “There is evidence demonstrating that these individuals are using their positions in circles of sacred learning to groom, recruit, and entice female followers with promises of marriage, access to shaykhs, study abroad opportunities, and entrée to exclusive socio spiritual networks.” (Ansari, 2015, “Adding up Islam,” para. 2). She described the scenario as a sheikh who kept a number of women at bay and then chose one of them to marry, “One can only imagine what these women’s perception of Islam has become, especially when the shaykh was their Islam.” (Ansari, 2015, “Adding up Islam,” para. 4).

Here she examined digital religion. She carefully outlined the effect of digital religion on relationships (though she did not call it digital religion), and slammed the “techno-obsessed, and consumer -driven culture that dictated that every `alam [scholar], school and institution market their ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ Islamic ‘products and services’ or perish.” (Ansari, 2015, para. 5). She posited that the celebrity sheikh, and his “unimpeachable piety and character” (Ansari,

2015, para. 5) are a direct result of the success of charismatic teachers in digital spaces. She concluded the article with a direct appeal to her audience: “What is a woman’s broken heart worth? What does a woman’s loss of faith mean to us? ... When individuals abuse their religious authority in this fashion, are they upholding the integrity of the tradition with which they have been entrusted? ... We need to think very carefully about how we as teachers, scholars, *mashayikh* [a plural form of sheikh]. and students contribute to the blurred lines that have resulted in broken homes, broken hearts, and broken minds.” (Ansari, 2015, Talaq by Text Message, para. 2). Then the comments began.

The 77 pages of comments ran the gamut from red herring arguments to sincere thanks, to the final comment “If we have such a problem as you mentioned in our society and yet we get backlash for speaking about it, then there may be a bigger issue at hand.” (Ansari, 2015, Comment 111, para. 3). Zaynab responded again and again within the comments, attempting to bring her readers back to her original point. When they strayed on to other issues, she was right there reiterating her original argument. For example, “@Br. Hameed, it’s not fair to stereotype African American men as inherently polygynous. The behavior I highlight in my article cannot be ascribed to one group of men to the exclusion of another.” (Ansar, 2015, Comment 111, Reply 26, para. 1) and “@Sr. Amatullah, thanks for your feedback. I’m not absolving the sisters of all responsibility. *InshaAllah* [God-willing] there will be a follow up article to address the role of the women in these situations” (Ansari, 2015, comment 3, reply 3, para. 1) etc... She was the first to speak publicly about spiritual abuse, and one year after her article a famous public ‘celebrity’ sheikh was blasted across social media for unethical behavior. His story was followed by others and the topic of spiritual abuse developed into an important topic of research, discussion, and solutions for many Muslim scholars, male and female.

Two years later Ansari wrote a very serious and sober article for *The Muslim 500*, “Triple Consciousness: Islamic Institutions of Higher Education, Women, & Sacred Law.” (Ansari, 2018). Ansari argued for the intellectual involvement of Muslim women in the spaces of higher learning both as teachers and as students. She said, “The twenty-first century CE/fifteenth century AH is an exciting time for the advancement of female scholarship as part of a larger project of reviving Islam’s intellectual and spiritual heritage and empowering individual adherents of the faith to rise to the demands of living a life of worship and restraint in a culture increasingly marked by a rejection of divine guidance in the pursuit of physical comfort and instant gratification.” (Ansari, 2018, para 3). Her discussion of the triple consciousness, an idea adopted from WEB Du Bois, displayed deep thinking around the places women occupied in their lived experiences. She said, “One of the central challenges facing Muslim communities in North America is how to define, interpret, and apply Islamic religious law, the Shariah, within the multiple minority contexts in which Muslims are situated. American Muslims, hearkening back to WEB Du Bois’s insights in the *Souls of Black Folk*, operate with a sort of triple consciousness. They are religious minorities and often racial and/or ethnic minorities. Muslim women, additionally take on further minority status because of the way many community institutions are structured where leadership and religious authority is often the exclusive domain of men.” (Ansari, 2018, para. 5). Her article recognized the challenges faced by Muslim men and women and offered a theoretical underpinning to support the involvement of women at the level of critical questions around Islamic law and authority. She called on the Muslim institutions of higher learning to “rise to the challenge of facilitating the path forward for current and future generations of women and men seeking the countenance of God.” (Ansari, 2018, para. 6).

Ansari's message throughout was one of traditionalism, ethics, and concern for community. She identified problems, sometimes controversial problems, and broached the problem from a traditional and ethical standpoint. This was the theme throughout her writings.

### **Zainab Alwani**

Zainab Alwani was a prolific writer, writing in Arabic and English. Her two English books were *What Muslims Say about Domestic Violence: a Guide for Helping Muslim Families* (2003) and *Muslim Women and Global Challenges: Seeking Change through a Quranic Textual Approach and the Prophetic Model* (2012). She wrote in *What Islam Says about Domestic Violence* (2003), "This guide is written for anyone working in the area of domestic violence: advocates, police officers, mental health workers, shelter staff, medical providers, lawyers, etc. It is an effort to explain the perspective of Islam on the issue of domestic violence. It is intended to be used as a training supplement for those who work in this field with specific reference to the Power and Control Wheel, a tool used in this field to define the various types of domestic abuse... Because Islam is relatively unfamiliar to most workers in this country, dealing with the Muslim population is often challenging and confusing." (Alwani & Abugideri, 2003). This first book was written to address a community issue. Domestic violence was a feminist issue, and for Alwani it was a religious issue. She provided the scholarly discussion and her co-author provided mental health material. She argued in the book that violence against women was against shari'a law and gave examples from sacred text and modern scholars to prove her point. Since this was a book written for Non-Muslims in the field of domestic violence, she included a long discussion teaching them how to interpret things like "using male privilege" and "economic abuse" through an Islamic lens. She said, for example, "Islam anticipates that men may take advantage of their position of power in the society. For this reason, many verses in the Quran



and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) [peace and blessings be upon him] remind men to treat women with kindness, compassion and justice. Men are not the ‘masters’ of women, rather, God is the master of both men and women...” (Alwani & Abugideri, 2003, p. 71) and “It is the responsibility of Muslim men to provide for women financially...Men should not make women feel humiliated or indebted to them because it is a Muslim woman’s right to be taken care of financially. Even if he is unable to provide for her fully, she has the choice of working outside the home but is not required to contribute to household expenses.” (Alwani & Abugideri, 2003, p. 70).

Nearly ten years later, in 2012, she published *Muslim Women and Global Challenges: Seeking Change through a Quranic Textual Approach and the Prophetic Model*. She said in the preface, “Despite many examples of women scholars throughout the history of the Muslim Ummah, the tradition of legal scholarship as a whole is characterized by a dearth of women’s voices. This lack of women’s representation has deeply affected women’s legal rights in many areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other financial and commercial rights. This study is only one small step of many to come.” (Alwani, 2012, p. iii). She summarized her approach in the introduction, “The model suggests that nurturing the role of women in society is critical; they are the eyes of society that pinpoint the problem and help provide effective solutions. The healthy partnership *wilayya* [friendship] between men and women as *khalifs*/vicegerents, stewards or God-agents on this earth should be maintained and enforced to help cleanse the society of its corruption and drive it toward peacefulness and purity. It is the hope of this study that having this understanding will enable Muslim communities to realize the significance of Muslim women’s role in establishing a healthy and peaceful human culture and society.” (Alwani, 2012, p. 4). In the nine years between publications, the message was the

same, but it had grown to encompass a larger plain. Alwani relied on her theory of a Quranic textual model to discuss women's issues in both books but expanded upon it in the second.

Recently she became editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* – a publication of the Islamic Seminary Foundation. The journal was focused on “promoting academic and professional research about recent developments in American Muslim communities.” And aimed “.... To provide a platform for scholars, students, and researchers to exchange their latest findings from varied disciplines.” (Alwani, 2018, p.1). Her contribution in the first volume was an analysis of Quranic interpretation and an interesting argument for a new methodology of interpretation meant to assist scholars in interacting with modern challenges. In this article she used the hermeneutical explanations of an Egyptian female *mufasira* [one who explains the meanings of Quran] to underline some of her points. Again, her message was the importance of female scholarship and further development of her own theory of the Quranic textual approach. She said, “This paper is concerned with the Quranic methodology of *al-wahda al-bina'iyya li-l-Quran* (the Quran's structural unity) and its impact in the arena of religious sciences and beyond. I provide a concise overview of the classical and contemporary debates concerning the genealogy of this method, including examples and brief analysis of the works of a number of modern scholars who have contributed to the development of this methodology.” (Ansari, 2018, p. 7). The primary scholar, other than her father, that she quoted and referred to, was an Egyptian woman scholar who died in 1998 and left behind a unique approach to Quranic hermeneutics.

The trajectory of work for Dr. Zainab had been consistent. Following in her father's footsteps and building on his theories, she advocated for a distinct style of Quranic thinking

around modern issues and for the involvement of women at all levels of leadership and scholarship.

### **Jamillah Karim**

Karim published her first book in 2009; *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah* (Karim, 2009). She looked deeply at issues of racism and relationships between South Asian immigrant Muslim women and Black American Muslim women. It was a scholarly, but accessible, book. She said, “*American Muslim Women* is a multilayered, ethnographic account of race relations in the American *ummah*, told through the voices of African American and South Asian Muslim women. I chose women to tell the stories of the American *ummah* so as to elevate their voices in the production of knowledge about Islam and Muslim communities, areas otherwise dominated by men. Even though women’s words paint portraits of the American *ummah*, this book also broadly represents African American and South Asian immigrant Muslim relations in ways that resonate with the experiences of American Muslim men and women.” (Karim, 2009, p. 3). This book centered her messaging around race relations and the contributions of women in the history of the development of Islam in America.

Her next book was published in 2014. This book, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam*, was co-authored with Dawn-Marie Gibson and looked at the women’s experience of the Nation of Islam in its beginnings, the split, and how the women of the two communities were working together. The authors said, “This book argues that the racial climate of the United States has made the Nation of Islam particularly appealing to African American women. In its early years, these women were primarily interested in its race-uplift and community-building messages, but they also embraced the Nation’s traditional gender roles... In sum, we argue that the Nation of Islam experience for women has been characterized by an

expression of Islam sensitive to American cultural messages about race and gender but also by gender and race ideals in the Islamic tradition.” (Karim, 2014, p. 2). This book told a liberating story of traditional gender roles as they were manifested in the Nation of Islam. As the Nation transitioned to Sunni Islam, this process of liberation continued, “Women describe Imam Mohammed’s leadership as freeing also because of his new gender ideology, which was based primarily on his understanding of the Quran and the Sunna [ways and words of the Prophet of Islam], wherein women are viewed as equal spiritual and intellectual counterparts to men.” (Karim & Gibson, 2014, p. 229).

Both of these books told academic stories of Muslim women. They underlined important issues that Muslims in America were facing, and offered some suggestions based on research for further exploration of these issues. Karim’s 2009 book offered practical suggestions to the Muslim ummah for righting wrongs caused by racism and building relationships between ethnic groups and her 2014 book rewrote the history of Islam in America, moving it from a story of immigrants to a story of black women and their men.

Her articles at Sapelo Square were bite sized portions of important history and important narrative work that built identity and pride in self and community. She wrote biographical narratives of important black Muslim women such as Sister Clara Muhammad, emphasizing her leadership and single-handed management of the early days of the Nation, and Ana Karim, the first woman editor of the Nation’s newspaper, Muhammad Speaks. These articles were a continuation of the messaging in her two books.

Her blog, “Hagar Lives”, was more personal. Here, she wrote heartfelt appeals to her readers to become ‘radical lovers’, shared her own personal story along that path, and allowed others to write of their journeys. She wrote, “I am reminded of the moment when I realized that

love was the reward for *ihsan* (excellence in character and behavior). I mean really realized it, and I began to do so the moment when, from the outside, it appeared that I had lost out on the pursuit of love as the world sees it. I was experiencing this unseen love, between God and me, which many people would expect, given that we turn to Allah in hardship. But what was mind-blowing was the human love that suddenly overflowed in my direction. That even I had not anticipated. In God's mercy and loving kindness, He not only makes His Love tangible, but He gives His Love through actual people. And the best of people through whom He showers His love is His Beloved (S)," (Karim, 2018, 'Oct 12, 2017', para 1.). She included two poems, both of which expressed her experience with what she was calling radical love – the love of human beings because of the love of God.

**A Prayer for Hagar** (Karim 2018)

And I wrote all of the above to provide context to a poem inspired by Hagar (R). But before the poem, there is Prophet Ibrahim's (S) prayer. I've read this prayer countless times before, but it wasn't until this time that it came to me, that his prayer embodied Radical Love, and I couldn't wait to share with you. And I had to before this sacred month left us. My way of saying, I love you.

Mother Hagar,  
After drinking from your sacred bosom,  
Walking your sacred struggle,  
The pilgrims have left you,  
Returning home,

But home is where the heart is,  
We are still thinking of you,  
Remembering you,

Every time we hear your story, we worry for you,  
Who will feed you, sustain you?

Then we remember,

Prophet Ibrahim (S) left you,  
But his first prayer was for you,  
A man of heart,  
Sustenance was the last thing he worried for you!

“Our Lord! Verily, I have settled some of my progeny in a valley without cultivation by Your Sacred House, our Lord, that they might perform the prayer. So cause the hearts of people to incline toward them, and provide them with fruits, that haply they may give thanks.”

Prophet Ibrahim’s prayer embodies Radical Love through and through,  
Who would expect to find love where there is hardly life?  
But Prophet Ibrahim knew,

Devotion to God was his first concern,  
“That they might perform the prayer,”  
Divine Love would spill over from the cup of devotion,  
He knew.

And how does Divine Love manifest here on earth? In human hearts--Prophet Ibrahim’s dua’ for his family--and then fruits. This is the prayer for true happiness, he knew.

### **My First Radical Love Poem (Karim, 2018)**

So now that I’ve explained Radical Love, it won’t surprise you that my first Radical Love poem is for her. In the embrace of a sister beloved, I remember Hagar.

“Being with Hagar”

Fullness flowing everywhere,  
My hand in her hand,  
My slender arm wrapped in her fullness as her baby sucks the milk that Allah gave,

Our hearts occupied with the remembrance of Allah,  
Our eyes on the Awliya’ Allah,  
Our bodies at the house of Allah,

All other desires,  
The remembrances of all other beloveds,  
They stream down into this single gushing river,

This love came out of dying,  
Out of intense longing,  
It came when my heart was broken,  
And I could only turn to God,

It came when I became Hagar,  
Left in the desert with only God to fall on,

This love came like Zamzam,  
Out of nowhere, making it utterly Divine,  
It is the love that pilgrims drink from,  
Pure because the source is Pure,

Allah is the Holy One,  
Blessing this love,  
Elevating this love,  
Giving me life,  
Turning me to Allah and His Beloved,

Through him, *sallallahu alayhi wassalam*, [peace and prayers be upon him]  
Through the Beneficent King, the Holy One,  
Through her, may Allah be pleased with Hagar,  
I have tasted the sweetness of Iman,  
And have been led to the path of Ihsan,  
Where I am living and dying,  
For the Face of Allah.

Her third book had the working title, *Radical Love: Sufi Reflections on Heartbreak and Happiness*. Where she may bring together her very different voices. While her tone differed between the books and the blog, Dr. Karim was consistent in her message. She was telling stories about women and reaching out to all Muslims to grow in their faith.

### **Shehnaz Karim**

Shehnaz Karim had not published a book yet, but she was a contributor to her organization's Sanad Collective website. She posted four times. Three of the four posts were published in Ramadan 2018 (May and June 2018) and one was published in November 2018, the Islamic month of *Rabi`a al-Awwal* [the first spring]. The blogs gave spiritual advice around the religious duties of the Islamic months of Ramadan and *Rabi`a al-Awwal*. She said in "Ramadan: Month of Happiness," "Our Teachers in Tarim sing, on the first night of Ramadan: 'Welcome, O Month of Ramadan seeking God! Welcome, O Month of Happiness.' Wait, Happiness? Really?"

In a religious rite? Yes! Happiness. Happiness is an act of worship – it shows appreciation for God’s Blessings and joy to others. Show happiness this month: smile, because you are standing under a shower of blessings, God’s grace, His unconditional love, and His forgiveness. You don’t even have to work hard for these blessings. He’s giving them out for free.” (Karim, Nov. 12, 2018, para. 1 & 2). Then in “Allah is Actually Nice,” she said, “... The story is so much bigger. The Goodness of God is so much wider and more generous than our limited accounting. Before you allow yourself to feel sorrow at not being able to fast or pray, first check to see if this circumstance of yours has affected the true Reality of things.” (Karim, May 24, 2018, para 9). The theme continued in “Having your Period: Nothing but a Blessing.” a blog that was a response to a social media storm about period shaming. S. Karim structured the blog as a letter, “I write this letter to you, because it breaks my heart that anyone would feel deprived or punished by the loving action of God in their life. It breaks my heart that we could think in such a destructive way of our Lord, laboring under the harmful belief that He would exclude us from good or strike us with a state that has no spiritual meaning, or decree upon us with a disconnection from Him – and once a month at that! What kind of a view do we have of God if that is the kind of action we ascribe to Him? What kind of a God are we turning Him, Most High, into?” (Kareem, June 1, 2018, para 1).

S. Karim’s message was about God. Whether she was talking about menstruation or Ramadan she was focused on changing her audience’s perspective about God. Her blogs were spiritual and metaphysical in tone.

### **Halima Krausen**

Halima Krausen’s articles were focused on theological issues. In 2005, Krausen wrote, *Can Women be Imams?* An article written in response to the debate and discussion sparked



amongst Muslims around the world in 2005 by Amina Wadud. The article was a heady analysis of the Islamic legal possibility for female imamship. She said, “I believe the issue may seem simple, but is more complicated than it appears.” (Krausen, 2005, para 1). She defined imam, looked at “ontological equality of man and woman in the Koran” (Krausen, 2005, section 3), and discussed a number of opinions of historical scholars. She concluded by both asking for reform, while insisting on her hold to tradition, “... the teaching that Mohammed is the final messenger of God is not the same as saying that the situation of the past must never change. It’s much more the starting point for a more mature way of contributing to the welfare of human society. I certainly don’t want to be misunderstood as meaning that I lack respect for any of the scholars of the past. Whatever their position, they have tried hard not simply to follow isolated statements or hasty conclusions from precedent, but to work systematically within the framework of their respective methodology, experience and society. In the same spirit, we should not follow them blindly. We should have the courage to ask our won questions, to study the matter conscientiously and to reach conclusions which make sense in our times.” (Krausen, 2005, “Final Comments”, para, 2-5).

In 2011, Krausen wrote an article entitled, “*The Concept of Men – a Woman’s Reading of Quran*”. In this article she continued on the same vein; calling for reform from within the tradition. She said, “Questioning the traditional development of ideas and practice can be very unsettling because it takes us out of the comfort zone of familiar habits and expectations. And let’s be honest: religious tradition is very often perceived as a kind of “home zone” with familiar terminology, rituals, and expectations where we can find some stability and rest from the challenges of today’s world where so many things are constantly changing.” (Krausen, 2011, para. 26). She then demonstrated the role of prophets in bringing change to society and

concluded, “Men and women are not enemies in principle. Restoring the balance does not need yet another ingenious ideology that is imposed on people but conscientious introspection, work on ourselves, individually and within our own neighborhood group; a fruitful dialogue between men and women, old and young, between scholars in different fields and people with ordinary life experience, preservers of established traditions and people with fresh challenging new ideas. According to the Quran, men and women are to be “each other’s reliable friend. They promote what is good and prevent what is evil and establish prayer and give charity and obey God and His messenger. God bestows mercy on them. God is a Mighty Friend, Wise.” (Krausen, 2011, para. 36). Her paper was sophisticated and technical. It moved smoothly from etymology to social constructs and then on to the psychology of change. Throughout, Krausen (2011) quoted the Quran, Hadith and early scholarship. In a sense her argument for women leading prayers in 2005 morphed into an examination of what exactly was a man? And have we been translating the words for human into words for man? She said, “The next Quranic term to consider is *adam* – and before you now start taking this simply a male proper name and start speculating on the “historical Adam” as the one “before whom the angels bowed down”, be reminded that the word is related with *adimah* (or also *adamah* in Biblical Hebrew), the surface of the earth, and traditions in Tabari (d. 923) explain how the different skin colors can be traced back to the different colors of the surface from which earth was taken for the creation of the human being. The word is also related with *adim* (skin), the surface that limits the space that we take up in existence and, at the same time, is the interface for our physical contact with each other.” (Krausen, 2011, para 8). It was a deep challenge, that asked readers to reflect on assumed knowledge and addressed substantial issues in community and especially those related to women and the work of women in community.

By 2018, Krausen had moved into interfaith work and her August publication “Creation: A Perspective from the Quran” (Krausen, 2018) reflected this interest. Still, in the article she addressed issues of men and women, and the foundational equality of both genders. The article is theologically centered, and based entirely on Quranic verses, as is evident in the title. Her earlier articles flowed neatly into this one. She began, “I like to work with narratives from different perspectives, exploring Biblical and Quranic stories with critical and creative methods, often together with Jewish and/or Christian partners. There is often an element of surprise when workshop participants discover the similarities and differences, either in the language... or in the details of a story.” (Krausen, 2018, para 1). She then argued, “I could actually in a somewhat mischievous way, translate the statement literally, strictly following the grammatical gender of the words in the original text: It would then say that God ‘created you from a single soul (nafs, feminine), and from her, He created her husband’ – which would almost indicate that ‘Eve’ was first, followed by ‘Adam’. However, the intention of the text is not a counter-statement to the Biblical narrative but a more abstract presentation of the one source from which many men and women were scattered on earth, ultimately, as indicated in other passages, organizing into ‘nations and tribes’ with ‘different colors and languages’ which are all considered to be ‘among God’s signs’ and of one human family. ... Modern commentators take this verse as one of the key texts emphasizing the ontological equality of men and women.” (Krausen, 2018, “2. Surah 4:1”, para. 1). She concluded, “I find that it is important for modern discussions of human rights and responsibilities to rethink questions about the concept of the human being, and not only for Muslim theologians or in interfaith dialogue. How do we deal with individuals being equal and yet special? With achievements and failures? With being part of the fabric of nature and yet in charge of it? With unity and diversity? I keep finding food for thought on these questions in all

our scriptures. The point is to look at them together.” (Krausen, 2018, “7. Surah 10:115-123”, para. 2)

Krausen was a serious thinker and no matter what she was addressing, she did it with theological breadth and the depth of critical thinking. She was concerned with reform, thinking about deep questions around the nature of humanity, and attempting to create social change by rethinking theological understandings of men and women.

### **Kaltun Karani**

In 2016, Karani began her blog and one of her first posts was entitled, “Lessons of a New Marriage”. It was an honest, light-hearted, but serious reflection on marriage. She shared, “Perhaps both my husband and I expected happily ever after; when the reality of marriage isn’t completely like this. Rather, there are stages and transitions we hardly speak about. There are definitely confusing days, unhappy days, angry days, joyful days, playful days and completely boring days. We were both in for interesting surprises that revealed our true selves to one another.” (Karani, 2016, para. 4). She then gave tips for working through the early days of marriage. Two years later she continued the personal theme and wrote “Back to School: Creating a Tranquil Family Environment.” She shared personal experiences first, “Having had my son in pre-school the past two years and him starting kindergarten this year, we’ve experienced both smooth and chaotic transitions. I’m motivated by the positive energy we all feel when our transitions are smooth. Those smooth transitions were possible when our days started with mindful worship, snuggles, laughter, family meals and timely arrival at school and work.” (Karani, 2018, para. 1). She then offered tips and tricks to create a smooth morning routine and lifestyle management. Unlike the earlier article, Karani anchored her article with sacred text. She included a Hadith and then reflected on it, “What resonates with me specifically

about this hadeeth is that starting the day with Salah and all the goodness it comes with of wudhu [ritual washing], dhikr, dua, and the recitation of the Quran helps us start our day with energy and pleasant spirit.” (Karani, 2018, para. 4). Her development as a religious teacher was apparent.

At the end of 2018, Karani published her first book *Intentionally Rising: Lifestyle Designs for the Conscious Muslim*. It was a self-published workbook firmly anchored in sacred text, with space for the reader to take notes and respond to the activities in the book. She described her book as such, “Intentionally Rising is a workbook that you can use to create your ideal Muslim lifestyle. This guide is full of activities that will ask you to think about who you are, where you’ve been, and where you want to go. This workbook has questions to answer, visualizations to perform, du`as to make, and lists to write, all to help you discover which goals will get you closest to your most authentic self. Follow the steps below to use this workbook to improve your life.” (Karani, 2018, p. 5). Her book took her reader from exercise to exercise, using sacred text to underline her points, and exercises to involve the reader. Her earlier blogs asked for the involvement of her reader, but they were passive. The move to a workbook style publication demonstrated an inclination to involve her readers in the process of growth, rather than simply speak to them of growth.

### **Ieasha Prime**

Ieasha was working on two books, but neither was complete. Her articles were not readily available in a Google search, but she had published on Sapelo Square. Sapelo Square was an online space for Black Muslim voices. The mission of Sapelo square was “to celebrate and analyze the experiences of Black Muslims in the United States to create new understandings

of who they are, what they have done, and why that matters.” (Sapelo, About Us, nd.). The website was filled with content that included articles, blogs, video and artwork.

Prime’s writings for Sapelo Square speak to a Black Muslim audience. She used the first-person plural to align herself with her presumed audience. “It was under the veil of darkness that *our* ancestors would come together and pray to the Almighty.” (Prime, 2016, para 11) and “Mumblings in *our own* community made us second guess *our* participation in the Women’s March.” (Prime, 2017, 4/4, para. 3). In her speeches she was very intentional and aware of her audience, so it was clear that this habit found its way to her writing as well.

Her tafsīr (Quran exegesis) articles were written one year apart. The first, in 2016, rested on one chapter of the Quran that spoke about the Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad. She tied together his story, modern miraculous discoveries, and true faith, “He raised the Beloved Prophet (pbuh) [peace be upon him] to the heavens in a moment. This miracle exposed the hypocrites who thought they had faith. Upon hearing this news, they fell back in disbelief, while others would ascend to the ranks of true believers in Allah’s Power and Muhammad as His Messenger.

Allah continues to unfold the greatness of this miracle with scientific discoveries. The servant bearing witness to these inventions (cellphones, voice travel, Skype’s image travel, worm-holes and now Hawkins’s work on the God- particle) is increased in faith, increased in admiration for the miracle of Quran and further recognizes Allah’s Majesty and Power.” (Prime, 2016, para. 5-6)

She called for the reestablishment of a night journey and an ascension through prayer. This was where she spoke about the Black American community and their historical connection to secret nightly prayers. She called upon her readers to re-establish this habit, so that they

might, "...watch the miracles unfold in your life, in the community, and the world!" (Prime, 2016, para15)

One year later she contributed another tafsir (Quran exegesis) article, this one centered on a moment in Muslim history when the direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca. The verses about this change were in the second section of the Quran. Her explanation of these verses took her reader from 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia to 21<sup>st</sup> century America and she blasted the African American Muslim community for loss of focus, division, and the inability to shift their mindset and focus on God and God's mandates, especially of fasting.

This article was written after her appearance in the Women's March and demonstrated a sense of confidence and perhaps exasperation, not seen in the earlier article. She wrote, "We have allowed our fears and grief to guide us. Our past hurt relationships have determined our gender relations; our degrees and overseas studies have determined our internal politics; our scarcity of resources has determined our leadership status; our misunderstandings have become our silent wars; our different madhabs have determined our masajid [plural for masjid, mosque]; our anger has decided our methods of justice and our past missteps have determined our present. Our Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome has forced us to fight with each other about definitions, rank, position, and methodology. Community leaders and imams are at odds; scholars and activists are at odds; organizers and teachers are at odds, our men and women are at odds; parents and children are at odds. We have chosen sides and despite having common enemies, we continue with the infighting." (Prime, April 2017). She then reached back to the entire second section of the Quran and pulled forth examples of hope, "Although, the odds seemed stacked in our favor and the task to overcome our challenges seems exhausting and unattainable, in this *juz'* [part], Allah gives abundant practical advice, and strong reminders of faith to manage the newly

established Muslim community. Among the reminders are David and Goliath, and methods to overcome enemies from within and without. In addition, He gives the mandates for fasting in Ramadan as a method of self-restraint, and hajj as a pillar of faith that bonds the Ummah. Finally, our Lord reaffirms that we are not alone in attaining this once we submit to Allah as true servants!” (Prime, 2017, para 9).

The progression of her writing was clear. In the first article she chose one part of the assigned section and connected the Black American Muslim community to the early community of Muslims. This first article was strong and had a clear voice, but it lacked the force of the next one. One year later, she addressed the entire section of Quran (not limiting herself to one idea), scolded her community, and offered hope and a plan to her readers.

One month before her second tafsīr article, she wrote about her experience at the Women’s March on Washington. Her article was both strong and vulnerable. She addressed criticism from within – questions about why she was there, and why it was important. She told of the hardship intrinsic in being a speaker at the March, and how she “wrapped my tongue around litanies of prayer needed to protect and facilitate the way.” (Prime, 2017, para 6). She explained the importance of the march, “This march was about forming strategic alliances that we will need in the future. We women needed to know who would stand with us. We were not merely marching to show Trump what we thought of him. Instead, we were aligning with others who shared the values on which we were looking to build.” (Prime, 2017, para 7). And she ended with a quote from Malcom X, whom she referred to by his Muslim name, “El Hajj Malik Shabazz” (Prime, 2017, para. 10)

The woman’s march on Washington may have been a pivotal event in Ieasha Prime’s life. Her audience grew, as did her confidence, or so it would seem in her writing. Prime’s writing



had a clear voice. Her message was to be a good Muslim, to overcome oppression and ally with neighbors in that work. She showed herself to be a scholar-activist in these articles. Even when she was explaining sacred text, it was in the context of how to be better and do better in the here and now. She did not mince words, connected herself to sacred text and quotes of early respected leaders, and included both theoretical discussion and practical advice.

### **Publications Summary**

All seven women wrote about women's issues. They addressed theology, law, faith, daily life, family life, spirituality, and other concerns about, around and directed towards Muslim women. They had very individual and unique voices.

**Voice and tone.** Zainab Alwani and Halima Krausen both had academic tones. Their articles and books were organized and written with sober exactness, clear arguments, and supportive citations. Zaynab Ansari was also more academic than others in tone. Her latest article especially reflected academic training in its use of theory and language.

Jamillah Karim, though also trained in western academia, had a tone that was closer to an advisor than an academic. While she also wrote with clarity and included supporting citations, the personal and specific advice that she gave in her books and articles stood out. In her book, *American Muslim Women*, she advised the Muslim ummah to overcome problems of race relations offering clear directions and advice. She suggested that Muslim women travel and meet one another. She called on immigrant Muslims to listen to African American Muslims when they speak of racism and to be sensitive to their feelings of racism, understanding that they come from a background of systemic racism that the immigrant Muslim may struggle to see. On the other hand, she called on African Americans to consider reasons other than race for uncomfortable interactions, citing cultural differences as a possible culprit. She also called on

both communities to work better and harder to rectify issues around poverty in America. Finally, she called on everyone to incorporate *ihsan* into their interactions (Karim, 2009). All of this was more like an elder advising a community than an academic recommending a methodology.

Shehnaz's tone was one of a loving mother, assuring her children that all would be well. One of her articles was entitled "Allah is actually nice" and in this article she called on readers to expect good from God. She talked about her personal pain when she saw Muslims who were practicing their faith and still expected that God might punish them at any moment. Similar to Shehnaz, Kaltun's blogs felt very personal. She drew on her own vulnerability to encourage others to grow and root themselves in faith.

Prime's tone was one of strength, and at times frustration. She wrote in the first-person plural, uniting herself with her readers, and pushing them forth into action.

**Message.** Each woman seemed to have a central message in her writing as well.

Zainab Alwani wrote consistently about a Quranic methodology for solving modern problems. It was manifested differently in different articles, but she always brought her reader back to the main point: the Quran needs to be approached as a whole, that verses must not be used in isolation to explain or create law.

Jamillah Karim's central message revolved around coming together. Her very personal blogs about radical love and her serious academic work all hinged on people loving one another and finding ways to get along.

Shehnaz Karim and Kaltun Karani had fewer articles or blogs, but each one radiated a central theme. Shehnaz's blogs called on the reader to look beyond tasks and find a place of deep faith. And Kaltun's blogs assured her readers, "You can do it!"

Halima Krausen’s articles centered around *ijtihad* (interpretation of legal sources for new rulings) and central theological concepts. She took on controversial issues, but with a sober and deliberate methodology. Whether she was discussing creation, women as imams, or the nature of men, she relied on Arabic etymology, a wide net of early theologians, and a critical eye at assumptions we have made over the years.

Zaynab Ansari’s articles addressed community concerns. From the question of progressive theology to spiritual abuse to access to women scholars, she addressed ‘hot topics’ of discussion with candor and control.

Ieasha Prime’s message was one of fighting oppression. She called on Muslims to grow intellectually, to be flexible, and to find agreement with one another. Her articles connected modern life to historical events, and she called on Muslims to live better lives by virtue of their connection to their past.



Figure 14. Summary of messages in publications

### Public Teaching Observations

Public teaching was done when teacher-leaders gave lectures, speeches, and classes which were either live on public platforms and/or recorded and uploaded to public sites. This was a different type of teaching than classroom teaching. The seven teacher-leaders I studied had numerous videos available for public consumption and all willingly spoke before mixed gender audiences. The following is a report about general observations about their lectures, the expression of lived experiences within the lecture time, and four standards of public teaching: (a) teacher is prepared, (b) teacher is personable, (c) teacher knows the content she is teaching, (d) teacher is engaging (see Appendix C for full details of the rubric).

#### Zaynab Ansari

Zaynab was an exemplary presenter and lecturer. Her lecture, “Do you Yearn to Know the Messenger of Allah?” was uploaded to the channel “The Beloved Seerah” on YouTube on June 29, 2018. The second lecture I observed, “The Masculine and Feminine in Islam”, was presented in September at ISNA 2018 in Houston, Texas. I attended live and recorded her lecture for future analysis. I also observed “Meeting our Maker” from the Al-Madina channel, posted in 2016.

**Lived experiences.** In “Yearning for the Prophet” Zainab began by acknowledging that her parents were in the audience, and that it was their presence at home that helped her prepare for the lecture that day. “I was thinking about Uwais al-Qarani [a sahabi who was good to his mother] as my parents, Br. Mansour and Sr. Kafi helped me get the kids ready this morning.” (The Beloved Seerah, 2017). Since the death of her husband, her parents had spent a lot of time helping her get back on the speaking circuit. During the talk, Zaynab demonstrated her own emotion and got tears in her eyes when talking about love of the Prophet of Islam. She was

willing to show her own emotion in the public space of the lecture, and then, she posted online recording.

In “The Masculine and Feminine in Islam” she commented about her fellow panelist who was an elder, and a well-known Imam. She quipped, “I don’t know how I got promoted to this level” (Ansari, 2018) and the Imam picked up his own microphone and said, “Because she’s qualified.” (Ansari, 2018.). During the recording I could hear some audience members commenting about her humility and her down-to-earth nature (Ansari, 2018).

She began and ended both lectures with Arabic prayers and said to the ISNA audience, “Move closer, unless you are expecting to slip out early” (Ansari, 2018) and the audience laughed. Throughout both lectures she was sure to recite the original Arabic of any sacred text she used for her discussion. Relying on the Arabic that conceivably more than 70% of the audience did not understand, Ansari underlined her qualification as an Arabic language speaker. The use of Arabic was universal, but Ansari’s accent and fluency were especially strong. By demonstrating her skill, she established her own qualifications to be speaking.

**Teaching.** Ansari demonstrated preparedness in her lectures. She had a clear beginning, middle and end, referred to notes, and relied confidently on sacred text to prove her point. She was personable. She used her own life as a resource for stories, and though her academic language is clear in her writing, when speaking she used mainstream, though sophisticated, vocabulary. She said in a short video called “Meeting our Maker” uploaded to the channel al-Madina Institute, “Why do people pay money to watch these films, to flock to these films? Why has the superhero genre become so popular? ... The number one appeal is these superheroes cannot die. Watching this – we are diverted from the fact that we will die, that we will meet

Allah.” (Al-Madina Institute, 2016). She repeated her points in new ways and sent her gaze across the room during all the talks I observed.

Ansari was grounded in her content area, did not bring in information from other disciplines very often, but did make the content relevant to her listeners. During the “Masculine and Feminine in Islam” talk she prefaced her remarks with an acknowledgement about the confusing times we live in, and clarity about her vantage point. She said, “This is a very sensitive conversation... I fully recognize that we live in a time of gender confusion. So please understand where I’m coming from as I reflect on this topic. I am coming from the vantage point of sincerely believing that this *dīn* (religion), one of the beautiful aspects of this religion is that we believe in clear-cut guidance in what it means to be unambiguously male and unambiguously female in this day and age..” (Ansari, 2018). She was polite and inclusive, but clear and firm in her stance.

She used her voice to engage the listeners, but the setting was not conducive to an actual discussion, so we do not hear critical questions for response. She was quite sober, though she did get a giggle out of the audience when asking them to move forward; it seemed she may have been surprised by that. She used narrative tools throughout, including historical storytelling and modern-day narratives that enriched her discourse.

Her lectures were distinguished, and judging by earlier lectures (also found on YouTube), they had been so for many years.

### **Kaltun Karani**

Kaltun was new to speaking, but her lectures were nonetheless adept. Her self-recorded lecture “How I take advantage of the *Arafah* [an important day of prayer during the Hajj] opportunity” was uploaded to her personal channel on Aug 19, 2018 and another “Islamic

mindset #1 Why do we wear the Hijab” was uploaded on Aug 9, 2016. During the end of 2018 she became a speaker for AlMaghrib Institute, and two of her public lectures were uploaded to their channel in January 2019. I observed the YouTube posting of ‘What Strong Women Do’ which was presented live in December 2018 at “Ilm Fest” in North Carolina.

**Lived experiences.** She mentioned her personal life and her personal experiences during her public lecture, “What Strong Women do.” She said, “Two months ago, *alhamdulillah* [praise God], Allah blessed me with a beautiful, precious little girl and we named her Maryam... As a new mom, you know, you are holding your little baby and you realize that there is a time where you feel a whole lot of emotions. I'm holding my little baby and I'm gazing into her eyes, and there was a moment where I felt this intense fear, worry about what kind of a world did I bring this little girl to? I love her, and obviously every parent loves their child, but what I was thinking about specifically when I was looking into her eyes at this time is the kind of world that we are living in, where women are being violated and abused in so many different ways.” (AlMaghrib, 2019). She was addressing misogyny without the label and continued, “I once had a gathering with my students. I have been teaching and mentoring women for over 10 years, and in one of those safe spaces that I had with my teen students, one of them was expressing herself and she was going on and on and on about how angry she is about how her father limits her abilities and what she's able to do because she's a woman and because she's a Muslim woman. In her rant, she ended it with like this angry, loud, exhausting, I'm-so-tired type of a phrase where she said, ‘It is not my fault that I am a bleep woman. It is not my fault that I am a bleep woman.’ The room was completely silent and it’s because she expressed what all the girls have been agonizing about for so long. I’m still aching. I know exactly what she’s talking about and so when I’m looking at my baby, I’m thinking, ‘I don’t want that for you.’” (AlMaghreb, 2019). Karani was

vulnerable and honest about her own emotions and her difficulty with the behavior of men. She talked about witnessing men argue over beating up a woman, two of the men asked the third, “Would you want it to happen to your daughter?” and the third man said, “If she did this and that, I would do it myself.” (AlMaghrib, 2019). This kind of violence and tragedy was painful, but Karani was courageous in speaking about it.

At the end of her speech she came back to her own lived experience as a new teacher-leader and said, “Lastly, I was really nervous coming up here to talk about this topic...I said, [to a mentor] ‘Sheikha I'm really nervous.’ She said, ‘What's your topic?’ ‘What strong Muslim women do.’ She was like, ‘So how are you going to be a strong Muslim woman? How are you going to be a strong Muslim woman and how are we all going to support one another to the path of Allah?’ Men and women.” (AlMaghrib, 2019). She closed by both sharing her own vulnerability and quoting a local teacher-leader.

In her self-recorded (without a live audience) YouTube lecture, “How I take advantage of the Arafah Opportunity” (Karani, 2018), she presented from her home and we heard her child in the background calling her or calling someone. She mentioned during the lecture how much she loved lakes, and that she would leave iftar (evening fast-breaking meal) for her family and go to a lake to have personal time for contemplation. “I would completely check out and make myself unavailable; I have a lot of responsibilities so not the whole day... I would go somewhere beautiful like a lake.. and I sit there and make du`a.. until maghreb [sunset prayer]...I think about every area of my life.” (Karani, 2018). And she spoke about the importance of contemplation and gratefulness. We understand that she both takes care of her family and her own spirituality.

**Teaching.** Kaltun Karani was very organized. She had a clear outline and relied heavily on sacred text recited in Arabic and translated into English for each of her points. She was also



personable, with a big smile, friendly manner, and accessible language. She told personal stories often and gave examples of her personal mentors, naming them, and of her home life.

She stayed on topic. She did not connect to many disciplines but did connect between Islamic concepts. Her enthusiasm was palpable, and though she did not joke she held a smile on her lips for most of the talk.

She ended her nine-minute lecture about hijab (Karani, 2016) with two questions to think about, giving her the distinction of one of the few women I studied who used questions as a teaching tool.

Her teaching was friendly and accessible. Looking at earlier lectures available on YouTube, she had always been enthusiastic, but developed a more natural presentation since her first available audio lecture in 2013.

### **Halima Krausen**

Halima Krausen was a serious teacher. She had a number of short teaching videos uploaded at the Radical Middle Way - these were the videos she quipped about during our interview. She felt that they were embarrassing because she had to speak to a camera instead of people. I included one of these in my analysis; "It's a Trust" uploaded on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I also observed a lecture "Islam and Social Justice", uploaded to INCISE (Intersectional Centre for Inclusion and Social Justice) on October 24, 2016.

**Lived experiences.** Krausen delved right into her lectures, but in the class, she spoke to the level of her own scholarship when she announced that the translation of the Qur'anic verses was her own and that they were free to discuss it with her. She said very formally, "Thank you very much for the invitation; it is a pleasure to be here, I am always curious to meet new people and come to know new academic environments, new lecture theatres." (Incise, 2016). She did

laugh a bit at her own little joke about the “new lecture theatre” (presumably funny because it was new only to her). She then delved into the introduction to her talk describing what she would be speaking about. She spoke about her own scholarship and said, “I’d like to apologize to people who are familiar with these texts, hopefully they don’t get bored, however you might come across the words in English that you are not familiar with because the translation is mine. So are the typos I’m just noticing (audience laughs). I am ready to discuss it, but this is what I normally do.” (Incise, 2016). Other than these examples, her teaching was not personal.

**Teaching.** Krausen was obviously well-prepared. In both the class lecture and the prerecorded video, she read from either a paper or a book. Her talks had a clear beginning, middle, and end. She relied on sacred text.

She was very serious and less of a personable teacher. She did smile (even at the camera!) and at times made the live audience laugh with quips about her typing etc., but she did not use facial expressions to make her point. Her language was advanced and scholarly, and she spent time discussing the etymology of words she was using to create her argument.

She was very well-versed in the content that she was teaching, mentioning early scholars and quoting from numerous sources. Krausen was clearly enthusiastic about her topic, even if that enthusiasm was demonstrated in a spirit of quietude and seriousness. She did not use personal, or other stories, or analogies or metaphor as tools to make the material more accessible to students/listeners.

### **Ieasha Prime**

Ieasha Prime was a very talented speaker. Her lecture, “Honoring Women: A Forgotten Sunnah” given in front of 10,000 people at the RIS (Reviving the Islamic spirit) conference in Toronto Canada in 2017 was powerful. I observed the uploaded recording on the

“Rismultimedia” channel. It was published June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. I also observed a public teaching event that was held in the United Kingdom, “Dispelling Myths” posted by “UK Muslims” in 2018.

**Lived experiences.** In the RIS speech Prime began by reciting Quran in Tajwid – a ritual way of opening lectures that many Muslim women do not do so as to avoid controversy. By reciting in a loud and clear voice, she let everyone know that she, though a convert, knew Quran well enough to recite it well - something many Arabs cannot do.

She also mentioned walking with her son during the women’s march. She said he had a confused look on his face because she was shouting slogans along with the other women; She said, “I was standing next to my son. I had him with me. *As subhanAllah* (praise be to God), as women were chanting "Our bodies, our choice. Our bodies, our choice", he looked at me because he knows his momma is no feminist. So, he looked at me and I said *subhanAllah*. I want him to understand, though, the significance of this as it relates to molestation and rape and assault against women. Yes, our bodies, our choice. But then I said ‘You know what? I want to recognize the Muslim women who are choosing to stand up and who are choosing to wear hijab in the face of Islamophobia. Who are choosing to wear hijab in the face of great threat.’ I wanted him to understand this is my head, my choice, my body, my choice. That this is the God given right *Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala* (may He be glorified and lauded) gave me. And so, as my son and I began to stand in that march and stand with what was right, I begin to notice where are my Muslim brothers?” (Rismultimedia, 2018). She shared her lived experience with her son, but wove that into her point about honoring women. She continued, “Where are the men who stand up for women? When women are saying ‘Listen, I have been violated. That there are wrongs and atrocities done against me.’ Now I’m not just talking about sexually, I’m talking

about the illiteracy rate. I'm talking about when a girl is 12 years old, her shoulders begin to sink in and she literally begins to hide herself because she doesn't believe that she's strong. She doesn't believe that she's valuable. I need the fathers to spend time with their daughters and say 'I honor you. I love you. You're important.' As our sister Samar reminded us about Fatima Zahra, I want them to implement the Sunnah when they walk in the room and they're with a group of men talking, you know, important matters. I want when your daughter walks in the room for you to kiss her hand and sit her in your place. Why? Because I want her to know that her place is in important matters." (Rismultimedia, 2018)

She reminded the audience that the choice to wear hijab was part of control and choice around body issues and that safety and protection from harassment were also Muslim issues. These reminders were rooted in her clarifying that she was not a feminist, but that she was concerned with women's issues. Her story about her son made her personable and demonstrated her own lived experience as a Muslim woman, mom, activist, and speaker.

She was even more personal during the Dispelling Myths talk in the UK in 2018. She talked about her background in the south of the USA, her family roots, and her own childhood and schooling. She said, "I was born Ieasha Prime even though I was not born into a Muslim family... I was born and raised in the south of America... it is very different than England. It is very conservative... and I grew up in a very strict Christian family. And what I mean by strict Christian is we went to church every Sunday, every Wednesday, and sometimes we had Bible study in our home. So, studying religious text was important to me." (UK Muslims, 2018). She then told the story of how she came to Islam and used this background to underline the points she then made about women in Islam and relationships between men and women.

**Teaching.** Prime was a powerful speaker. She referred to her phone at the RIS lecture for her notes, but at the Dispelling Myths presentation she seemed to work without notes, following the flow of an outline in her head. She was very personable; smiling and frowning at the audience depending on the point she was making or looking around the room in anticipation of applause. She painted images of her examples with words and repeated the same point in a number of different ways.

Prime used sacred text, translating some of the verses herself, and comfortably moved between Islamic exegesis and modern critical theory to make her fundamental points. At one point during the “Honoring Women” lecture, she painted the modern context, “When we live in an age where war is rampant. When we live in an age that we have lost our humanity. When we live in an age where people can literally watch others starve to death. When people can come into villages and burn them down with no sense of mercy. When police can beat down innocent people in the street and feel no shame because they feel justified because of their color or because of their race or because of their religion. When we have the level of lack of education, there is 63% of Muslim women in the Muslim world are illiterate. When we have a world that is filled with the kind of hatred and the kind of desperation and destitution and violence. When we will imprison people at mass levels of incarceration. When we imprison them.” (Rismultimedia, 2018). And then, pointing out the lost Sunnah of honoring women, said, “I’m reminded of the story of the *sahabas* [companions of the Prophet of Islam] that when they were in a battlefield and they begin to lose, they start to gather with each other and say ‘We have forgotten something of the Sunnah. And we’re not winning. And the reason Allah has not given us success because we have forgotten something of the Sunnah. What could it be?’ And someone said the *miswak* (toothbrush), the *miswak*! So, they started to brush their teeth with a miswak. Right? And

Subhan Allah, the enemies ran away because they said they're cleaning their teeth because they're going to eat us. And the enemy ran away. They didn't have to fight them again.” (Rismultimedia, 2018). Her point was that the Muslim ummah would find an easy cure to its ailments if they would return to the foundational and fundamental Sunnah of the honor and respect of women.

She was very enthusiastic and spent much of the lectures almost shouting into the microphone. She was animated and forceful, fervent and earnest about her subject matter.

### **Jamillah Karim**

Jamillah Kareem was an intellectual and purpose driven speaker. I observed two video lectures: The first was J. Karim’s presentation at the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Shaykh Hassan Cisse commemoration which was held at the Museum of African American History. She posted her 20-minute lecture onto her blog entitled, “Ziyarah through an African American Muslim Woman’s Eyes, Traveling full-circle – Atlanta, Detroit, Senegal.” I also observed her speaking (both live and the recorded version) to college-age students at the MSA (Muslim Students Association) portion of the ISNA 2017 convention. This lecture was called “The Legacy of Muhammad Ali: Solidarity Politics in Activism,” It was posted March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

**Lived Experiences.** Karim shared deeply personal experiences during her lectures. In the very personal speech given at the 6<sup>th</sup> annual commemoration, she bore her soul and talked about her effort in learning to love her sister-wife. She said, “And so, when it sometimes hurts to be in the company of my husband's wife, or to see her carrying their son, it is because, one by one, Allah is removing my attachment to all the things that can feel as though I am beautiful, excellent and superior in the eyes of my husband or in the eyes of the world. My attachments, my physical features, to my knowledge and talent, to my credential, to my marital status, to my

wealth, to my friends, even to my spirituality. The only way to withstand this pain was to fill my heart with Allah. Which meant attempting to not see her so much, but to see Allah. As Sheikh Hassan has said, if you observe Allah in everything, you will end up by seeing Allah in everything.” (Nasru Ilm America, 2017). She then clarified her purpose at the end of her lecture, “I end with a clarification: My message today is not a call to polygyny. Rather, I call us to bear witness to the fact that, as Sheikh Hassan and Sheikh Mahi have reminded us on many occasions, Islam calls us to brotherhood and sisterhood. As I demonstrate in my book on the American Ummah, the Ummah is filled with spaces and opportunities for people from different ethnic, cultural, economic backgrounds to come together when they would not otherwise. Similarly, for each of us personally, our faith pushes us to love in ways we would not otherwise. And when it comes to love for our brother or sister, the people of ihsan love with an exceptional love,” (Nasrul Ilm America, 2017).

The MSA lecture about Mohammad Ali began with J. Karim picking up a copy of Ebony magazine and quoting from it. This talk was a tribute to the boxer, but Jamillah Karim made a much broader point. She said, “I came to the realization that Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala created and nurtured and shaped this amazing person, this amazing human being that we knew as Mohammad Ali really to point us to Muhammad the Prophet *salla Allahu alaihi wa salam*. I came to this realization because of the way they talked about Mohammad’s love for humanity, his mercy to all people, his ability to connect with people regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, and class, the fact that everyone who met him loved him, all of that just kept taking me back to the Prophet *salla Allahu alaihi wa salam*.” (Msanational, 2017).

In both cases Jamillah Karim shared her innermost feelings and thoughts. She was vulnerable and emotional, while intellectual and on topic. She wove her emotional life into her intellectual life in her public teaching.

**Teaching.** J. Karim was consistently well-prepared for her lectures. She both relied on sacred text (quoted in English) and connected her lecture to modern topics and ideas. She allowed herself to be vulnerable during her speeches and told very personal stories in order to underline her message. When talking about her activism, she demonstrated that she began with herself and used her personal talents of writing and speaking to make change. Her dissertation topic was an intentional attempt at activism. Though an academic, she used accessible language that included quotes from popular writers and/or Muslims.

She used analogy and drew a direct connection between Mohammad Ali and Prophet Muhammad. She then proceeded to tell stories and quote phrases to support this idea. Her main point was love. That both men were men of love who saw the solution to social injustices in Islam. She wove in W.E.B Dubois, Malcom X, Quran verses, Hadith and personal stories throughout her lecture.

She used notes and relied on them but was able to speak to the audience and address them. She was enthusiastic about every topic she spoke about. She used her voice and facial expression to motivate her listeners and used numerous narrative tools. During the Shaykh Hassan Cisse commemoration talk she was able to ignite responses like “*Allahu Akbar* [God is Great]” and “*ameen* [Amen]” and “ahh” from her audience. The recording of the MSA talk did not include audience responses, but in the absence of noise, the rapt attention of the audience became clear.



**Shehnaz Karim**

Many of the videos featuring Shehnaz Karim included her husband (also a religious leader and scholar), but my observations were only of those lectures she did alone. I observed “Being Muslim is not Possible without a Spiritual Life”, uploaded to the Rhoda Institute of Spiritual Learning channel (a division of her organization Sanad Collective) on August 8th, 2018. And I observed, “Healing the Mind”, also uploaded to the Rhoda channel. This class was in two parts, and both parts one and two were uploaded on Nov 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. “Healing the Mind” was recorded during the Lotus Blossom Retreat held in August 2017 in Quebec.

**Lived experiences.** Towards the middle of ‘Healing the Mind’ part one, S. Karim spoke about her own experience of working in an office that had been warned of impending letters that would let employees know who was to be laid off. She shared the effect of a particular meditation sequence (*wird al-latif* - litany of the Gentle One) and how it affected her. She said, “I often talk about that, how it's so sad if we're just walking around following customs. We follow the custom of keeping a beard or a covering our head. But when stress strikes, we're just like anyone else, no difference at all. Worried about the job, worried about making money, worried about how will I pay my rent? It's not to say that those things won't happen to us, but it's all in the reaction. How can we claim ... I'm saying this because in my workplace we went through a situation where there were cuts. This is a really interesting experience, when everybody is on the brink of getting a letter saying that your job doesn't exist anymore, and you can just feel the stress in the building and in every meeting and in everything that's going on. People are just waiting. ‘When is it going to land on my desk? Am I going to be one of those ...?’ And you don't know if you're going to be one that the big bosses have decided this job is not needed anymore. That was a very interesting ... actually, that's the time when Sheikh Hamdi first

introduced me to *wird al-Latif* (litany of the Gentle One) and the *awrad* (plural: litanies). It's a really special memory for me, because I thought about how it strengthened me so much. That entire summer, we had been reading a lot of awrad - it was new for me to have that many awrad, or even one, and subhanallah, when I got the letter, it just had no impact on me at all. I was like, 'How come it has no impact at all? It's like it didn't even happen.' Absolutely it was because of that inner connection that was being nurtured with Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala, that was even without me really focusing on the meanings too much. It was just ... there is a great benefit in drawing yourself into intense dhikr absolutely.'" (The Rhoda Institute of Islamic Spiritual Learning, 2017).

Shehnaz Karim was the only woman I studied who talked about her husband regularly. She attributed good action to him and quoted him regularly.

The lecture "Being Muslim is not Possible without a Spiritual Life" took place at the Lotus Center, which was the mosque and café where the Sanad collective work was located. She began by asking for people to introduce themselves and by bringing the audience closer to her. Everyone said their first name and S. Karim looked at each one and smiled. The live audience included numerous women and three men, and S. Karim needed to be reminded to give the (three) men an opportunity to say their name. She greeted the people who were also "watching on the other side of the screen." Again, she encouraged her listeners to good manners and setting an example of a good Muslim through examples from her own experiences. She said, "I was recently at an event, and I was walking with a woman there, and she said, 'That's what impresses me most about Muslims. That you actually have a personal relationship with the Creator.' She said, 'I believe in God, but what I find unique is this interest that Muslims have in having an actual personal relationship with the Creator.' So, I hope that we don't disappoint people like

that, where they actually do come into our lives and see that in our moments of stress we're as horrible and off-kilter as anybody else. I always bring up that example, because it's an extreme example that allows us to examine ourselves, to put ourselves on the examining table and say, 'Yeah, what is it? What is really my relationship with God? When the going gets tough where do I go? What do I do? How do I react? Do I just have the reaction of a person who doesn't believe in God at all?'" (The Rhoda Institute of Islamic Spiritual Learning, 2018). She continued to push people toward God, calling on them to trust God and live lives that would please Him.

**Teaching.** The two lectures were very different. "Healing the Mind" part one and part two were planned and organized lectures at a retreat, and "Being Muslim is not Possible without a Spiritual Life" was part of a series of classes called "Focus! It's a Journey." For Being Muslim, S. Karim asked the audience to request a topic or ask a question, but for "Healing the Mind" she had a planned talk and activities.

S. Karim referred to sacred text but relied quite a bit on real-life examples. When talking about focus, for instance, she gave examples of what took focus away in life rather than quoting text about the importance of focus. She was an expert in the use of personal stories and analogies in order to illustrate a point. She also repeated her message often and in new ways. Her face was pleasant, and she looked at the live audience. She made the material relevant to her listeners through examples and story. Her lectures were down-to-earth advice, and as such they had less structure than typical academic lectures. She did not rely heavily on sacred text, but rather on discussion, analogy, metaphor and narrative.

She asked questions and asked her listeners to think about her questions. She asked them "What does it mean to long for the Creator? What does that look like?" (The Rhoda Institute of Islamic Spiritual Learning, 2018). She smiled and looked at her listeners, was thoughtful and

contemplated her words before answering questions. S. Karim was widely read and included a variety of examples for each point she made.

### **Zainab Alwani**

Alwani was a serious and academic lecturer with the passion of an activist. For my observations I watched “One Book Many Voices; How to Approach Quranic Studies” and I attended and then reviewed the recording of her lecture at the Islamic Seminary of America’s opening event at ISNA55 2018. “One Book Many Voices” was presented at the Pearls of Quran conference in 2016 and uploaded to the al-Madina institute channel on Feb 26, 2017.

**Lived experiences.** Alwani began her lecture “One Book Many Voices” by holding every listener responsible in front of God for what they were about to hear. She said, “The goal of this session is to hold each one of us here in this hall accountable in a front of Allah, *subhānahu wa-ta’ālā*, the history, the world today, and the world later.” Shortly thereafter she asked the audience to assess their relationship to the Quran. “My question here, what is our relationship, and I’m saying “our,” but it means each one of you, including me - how do we describe our relationship with the Quran? What do you say? How do you answer this? It’s a responsibility. I’m standing before you and Allah is my witness, and I know what I’m saying here. Yes, we do of course, *al-ḥamdullilāh*, we recite, we read, we memorize the Quran, but can we call this as a relationship we describe with the Quran? Or there is something deeper?” (al-Madina Institute, 2017). She didn’t share her own experience here, but she insisted that her audience participate on an individual level of commitment.

She often mentioned her father (an influential scholar) in her lectures, and at the TISA presentation she read her father’s final testament as part of her talk. She said, “In my conclusion, I want just to share with you that vision within that it was mentioned also and is written in the

first volume (of the new journal she is launching), and this mission about who we are as Muslims, and in this, allowing me to just share a few words, that have been said by Dr Taha Alwani as his last will before he passed away.” (The Islamic Seminary of America, 2018). And she read his last will and testament, which was a call to Muslims to continue his work. This was her lived experience, her father as an example and leader of her work.

**Teaching.** Alwani was a very organized speaker. She relied heavily on sacred text and referred to notes while speaking. Dr. Zainab did not make her lecture personal by telling personal stories, but rather by asking the audience to interact personally with the material.

She smiled and used her hands to emphasize her points. She was personable. English was not her first language, but it was clear and accessible. She had a scholarly grasp on her topic areas and while she did not often bring in other disciplines outside of Islam, she easily moved between Islamic disciplines of theology, law and ethics to make her points. During the “One Book Many Voices” talk, she gave specific directions, “Get a notebook, or use your computer” (Al-Madina, 2017) in order to begin the process of *tadabur* (contemplation) of the Quran.

During the TISA talk, she told the story of how the seminary and the journal began. “A few years ago, Doctor Jones asked me to think about having a journal for the seminary before [the seminary] even started, and the reason, I guess, is to framework the vision of the seminary even before it starts. Why is this journal important, and what is the difference between this journal and thousands of other academic journals? As it was mentioned by Dr. Yasir Qadhi and by Dr. Jones and by Dr. Ihsan, this vision, I think, is to invite the intellectuals, thinkers, and also the imams and practitioners... the best way to have a voice for everyone... is to introduce it through journals.” (The Islamic Seminary of America, 2018).

She described a vision and a product (the journal). I attended this lecture live, and she was engaging and made us all want to read the journal. She linked the work of the journal and the seminary to her father's life work, bringing this talk into the focus of her life's work.

### **Public Teaching Summary**

The teacher-leaders were predictably talented speakers, and yet, very different. They were all well-prepared, though they demonstrated their preparedness in different ways. Halima Krausen read her lectures from a pre-prepared paper, Jamillah Karim, Zainab Alwani and Zaynab Ansari had notes to refer to, Ieasha Prime, Kaltun Karani and Shehnaz Karim seemed to be speaking from an outline in their heads.

Their personalities all showed through in their talks. Halima Krausen's seriousness, and Ieasha Prime's passion came through very clearly. Zainab Alwani and Shehnaz Karim showed their concern for the involvement of their audiences in their topic areas. Kaltun Karani and Jamillah Karim both told many personal stories and Zaynab Ansari used her own life as an example to underline her points.

There was no question that each speaker was well-versed in the content areas and enthusiastic about sharing her knowledge. And they engaged viewers with their voices, enthusiasm and sometimes, their critical questions, that drew in the audience and had them thinking and cheering and feeling the talk along with them.

The following mind-map indicates the speakers strengths based on the rubric. The mind-map indicates strengths, not existence. So, for example, Shehnaz Karim may have used sacred text during her public teaching, but her strengths were in narrative tools. This would be reflected in the figure below.

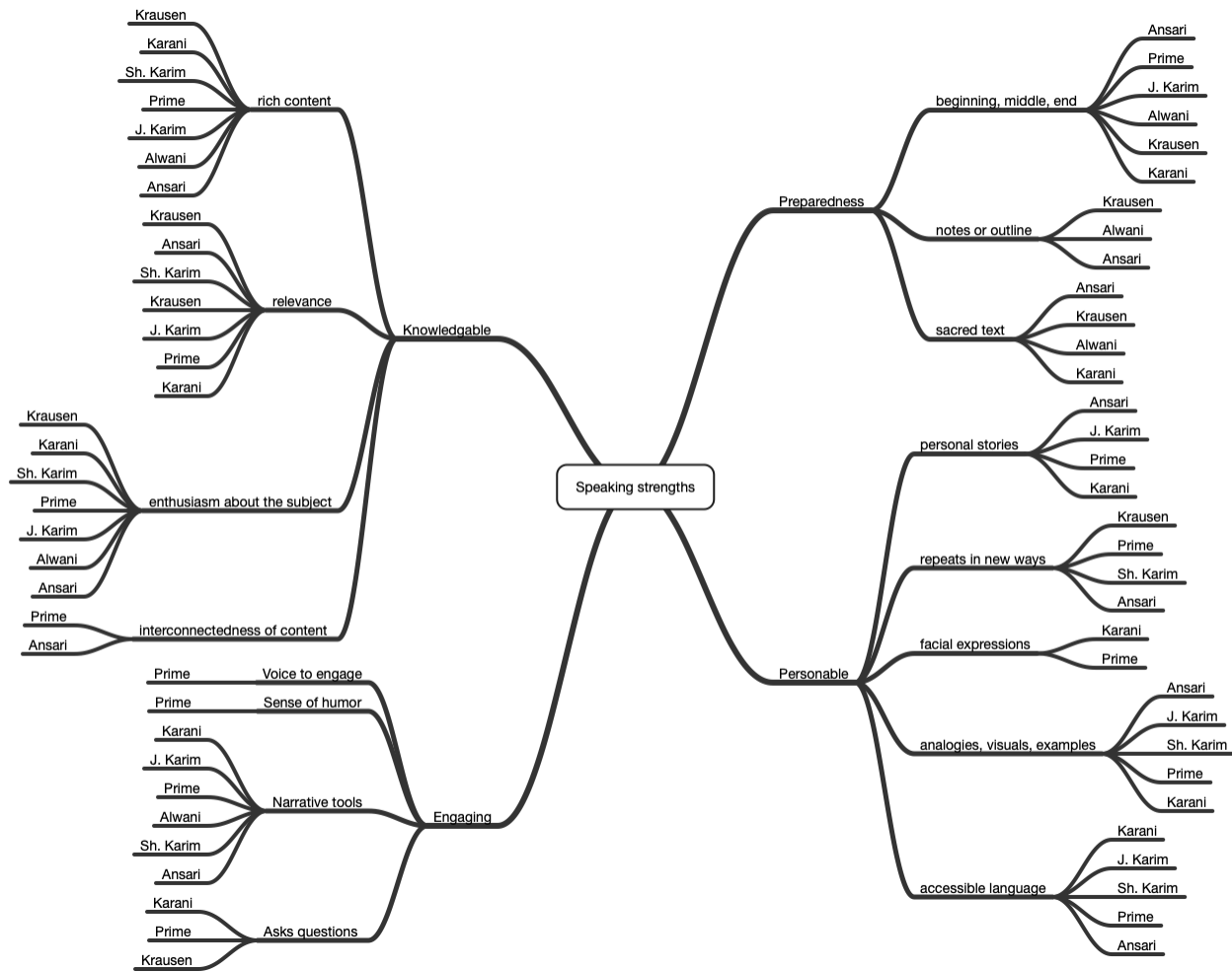


Figure 15: Speaking Strengths, the mind map above indicates strengths

### The Women’s Religious Leadership Network WhatsApp Thread

During the study I found myself added to a WhatsApp thread that described itself as a network of female scholars. Since I was looking at the phenomenology of women religious scholars, I found this serendipitous. I wondered if the conversation in the thread would support my findings, what it would add, and if it would change any of my thoughts around the phenomena of Muslim women teacher-leaders.

The seven participants answered direct questions about their lives lived in leadership. The thread added the element of a free discussion. It answered the question, “What do women teacher-leaders talk about with each other when no one is asking them questions?” I found that they talked about how to become and manage life as a teacher-leader. They discussed their challenges and problems. They were saying “Help me” to one another. “Give me the resources and answers that I need to do this work.” Though common understanding might assume that the problems of Islamophobia would be foremost in their minds, they did not mention it. Instead, they discussed internal problems, gender barriers, and theological questions. They were seeking help in their leadership from one another.

I studied six weeks of conversation and used a survey to help consolidate their biographical information.

The women’s religious leadership network (WRLN) became a WhatsApp thread on Sept 23, 2018. By November, when I was asked to join, there were 75 members. The members were women who were perceived by someone to be a teacher-leader. None of them requested to be added but were added by friends and/or colleagues in their networks. They ranged in age between their thirties and fifties, with the bulk of members (55) somewhere between 28 and 48.

Forty-three of the women studied Islam in the traditional ‘madrassa’ type of study (popular in England and the Indian subcontinent) and 42 went overseas to study in the traditional style. Thirty-five had an academic degree in Islamic studies and 33 had a supplementary university degree. Forty of the women identified their school of thought as traditional, in that they followed a *madhhab* [school of legal thought] and belonged to a Sufi tariqa and 31 said they were traditional, meaning they followed a madhhab but they were not part of a Sufi tariqa. None



identified as progressive, two identified as Salafi, the rest did not adhere to a specific school of thought or madhhab.

The WRLN thread was the first time many of the women ‘met’, though some did know each other or had mutual friends and acquaintances. They began the thread with introductions, but soon began to have a fast conversation. Analysis of the first six weeks of conversation produced themes of discussion and concern not unlike the themes that came forward in the interviews of the seven women in this study. The preponderance of concern was for issues that the academic world would consider feminist issues, though the women in the thread did not identify as feminist, “How are we tackling feminism?” someone asked, and then suggested that the group co-author a manual that addressed concerns. The issues they discussed ran the gamut from arranged marriage, to gendered barriers, honorifics for women, women Quran reciters, and more. The following is a thematic analysis of their discussion.

### **Becoming a Leader**

The women talked about mentorship, and the types of female scholars needed so that doors of leadership and teaching would be open to younger women.

**Mentorship.** One of the participants posted a long missive about her journey to leadership. She spoke of studies and hard personal work, but said she was lost. She lamented the lack of mentorship available for women, saying that men would often mentor men but not women and that women just did not have the same access to male teachers as the ‘brothers’.

To this another woman mentioned that she had fallen into leadership because there was a vacuum, but the work of leadership had taken her away from her studies, so she did not feel qualified. Her comments were met by reassurances from some of the women who knew her in

the thread. She also wished for mentorship and support to help her get the qualifications she needed.

The idea of mentorship was criticized by another woman who said, “You will never be able to find a mentor who will hold your hand...just get on with it.” But the original poster jumped back in and disagreed. She said, “We need mentors, if we do not have them, we cannot grow. The community lacks this, and it needs to be revived.”

**Female scholarship.** A discussion about the struggle to study and become qualified to teach and lead led to some discussion around what type of women leader is needed. There was some criticism of the madrassa type programs in England, and one of the participants said that most schools do not provide the same curriculum to men as they do to women. Women studied a condensed version in a shorter time with poorer teaching quality. Between this and the lack of an exam board, she said that few graduates even make it to the level of a generalist scholar.

The label generalist came from an earlier post when the thread owner defined the need for female leadership in Muslim communities in the following way. She said, “We need generalists, secular specialists and Islamic specialists.” She defined a generalist as someone who “could answer the day-to-day questions of the general community.” The community had very little religious literacy and therefore had a great need for teachers who could correct that. She added, “We need specialists in secular fields who are grounded in Islamic knowledge and can apply that knowledge to their field. And we need specialists in Islamic knowledge who can contribute to knowledge production within our communities.”

Someone responded that very few reached the level of generalist because religion as a discipline was not respected. There were not real careers or income that could come to women based on a lifetime of Islamic studies. The support system for women might be ready to pick up

slack for a medical or law degree, but few would be patient with a woman who was studying Islam.

There were a number of posts asking what the solution was, and some responses that had to do with child care, etc., but all of this brought them into larger community problems and women's issues.

### **Living Leadership**

The bulk of the conversations centered around what it meant to live leadership as a Muslim woman. The discussion brought together issues of gendered barriers, family, patriarchy, titles and honorifics, and the fear of being labeled a feminist.

**Gendered barriers.** Picking up on the conversation around becoming a leader, one of the women said, "It is not only access, but factors like children, constrained by husband, parents, family" also affected her ability to learn and work. She said that husbands are usually "ok" with a class, or whatever is convenient for them, but balk at real study or commitment. To which someone responded, "There are phases in a woman's life, like when children are very young, study and teaching is just too demanding." This received a question about phases in men's lives and commentary on societal expectations on the "micro and macro level that require men and women to make different decisions."

Another responded, "I'm an exhausted mom and cannot read all of this discussion, but there is another problem, which is that male scholars who even acknowledge women scholars are few and far between." Someone picked up on this thread of thought and said that women do not feel the presence of female leaders and instructors, so the whole field feels gender exclusive, making it more difficult for women to excel. To which someone responded that women had to

negotiate their external commitments, but men who devoted themselves to knowledge were praised, “If a woman devoted herself in the same way she would be labeled neglectful.”

In response to the question of access and barriers caused by husbands, one of the women said, “We need to work without disturbing the male mentality.” Another said, “I heard someone say if we make him [the husband] feel he is the number one priority we can do anything we want. This is the wisdom of interacting with the male ego.” And another posted a long quote by a male sheikh that talked about the angelic quality of a woman who sacrificed her life for her children, husband and family. She was closer to God than the scholars. This string of thought was met with a number of responses. One woman said “No!”, another “This is toxic thinking,” another calmly said, “This feels manipulative and dishonest,” and another, “So massage the male ego and all is well?” Someone commented, “I know someone who lives apart from her husband because he is not supportive of her studies.” And another “Some sisters have supportive husbands.”

**Family.** Family, in the form of a husband and children, was seen as a barrier to scholarship and leadership, though it was not accepted as an automatic barrier. The thread turned toward the question of how to interact with family when and if we are teacher-leaders. One woman said, “My life is packed. I don’t have time for anything.” Another asked the members to share their daily routine. “I’m looking for the elusive routine. Right now, I snatch moments during nap time and at night while the children sleep.” Another said, “I’m trying to figure out how to add blessing to my time, I can only work after the children are asleep at night.” Someone else complained, “I don’t have time to write because I don’t have time to breathe.”

The question was posed, “Do we agree that the priorities of women should be God, husband, and children, and then the avenue she can contribute to the most?” to which someone

said, “No. I don’t agree.” She made the argument that God was first, but after that each human being had something to offer society, and if the particular talents of one woman were necessary in society it would be a *‘fard kafaya’* or general obligation for her to work in the field, so that she could release the rest of the community of the burden of their obligation. She should choose her spouse wisely and find someone who would support her. Another woman asked, “what if she is already married?” “Is it community over husband?” To which the original responder said, “She must not deny herself the right to contribute, this is the right that is first due to herself.”

These thoughts brought them to discuss the need for a supportive partner. But someone said that a woman could also use her network for support and arrange babysitting etc. through her friends and acquaintance (even if she paid for child care, in this way she knew her caretakers). Someone gave an example of a woman in England who refused to speak anywhere that did not provide childcare for her. Another said that she can only teach online and on weekends because she does not have childcare.

But discussing alternate lifestyles could be treacherous.

**The dreaded feminist label.** A teacher-leader said, “I wrote an article that premised that wifedom and motherhood are not the only road to paradise and was blasted. I had to work so hard to prove that I was not a ‘feminist’ and that I was grounded in traditional knowledge and not trying to ‘change Islam’”.

The thread did not address feminism directly other than to talk about the difficulty of being labeled feminist. Someone said, “What are the legitimate reasons that women cannot solve these core issues? I am against the anti-feminist rhetoric without addressing our core issues.” And some of the women also talked about how genuine concerns of women are often silenced with knee-jerk anti-feminist and accusatory rhetoric. Someone asked, “How are we tackling

feminism?” and it was proposed that the community needed a manual to address women’s concerns (presumably without feminism).

Circling back to the article that premised that wifehood and motherhood are not the only way to paradise, someone commented, “We are more than wives and mothers!”. They looked for a practical pathway so that women could manage their lives and still study and lead. Babysitting was one of the few available options proposed.

Some of the women asked for book recommendations, and there were some Islamic feminist authors given in response. Each time the one recommending the book was sure to say that they were in disagreement with the author on many things, but they still learned a lot and the book was worth reading. They also recommended books and recordings about women and women’s issues written and presented by men, and in this case they did not feel the need to preface their recommendations with a disclaimer. This could have nothing to do with gender, but rather that the women authors who were recommended were self-identified feminists, and they were distancing themselves from their books while still recommending them as important reading material.

**Titles and honorifics.** The women expressed concern about legitimacy and one said, “Women scholars are undervalued.” A discussion ensued about the qualifications necessary to be a sheikha or ustadha. Someone said that men were reluctant to give female teachers titles because it gave an element of authority to the woman. Another said, “Women who deserve titles refuse them!” To which another responded, “We have been taught, between modesty and piety, to diminish ourselves”. And another commented, “It is a sense of humility and responsibility that is admirable to be shy to take on a title.” Someone else said, “These titles have no meaning” She said that anyone who teaches a *halaqa* [learning circle] is called an ustadha, and if they have

a crisis of faith, you may find her without hijab or with makeup and added, “We need to hold ourselves to higher standards.”

Agreeing with the difficulty of taking on a title, someone said, “My teachers called me sheikha and I freaked out.” And another pontificated, “The more knowledge a scholar has the more he shies away from a title. There are three phases of knowledge: The ignorant one who is aware he is ignorant. The ignorant one who thinks himself learned. The learned who knows himself to be ignorant.” Her comment was ignored, and a sociologist said, “These titles are conferred by an audience. They are arbitrary and have no meaning, plus always remember that power protects its own.”

But the others were not willing to let this topic go. “If women were respected and listened to the world would be a better place.” Someone else said, “Women should write *khutbas* [sermons], and another said, “I help my husband write his.” In the end, someone asked, “If titles are arbitrary how do we move forward? How do we get female teachers taken seriously? And another said, “We are mistaken if we are seeking the approval of men.” And the conversation was quieted by the comment, “We don’t worry about titles, we just do the work.”

**The work.** The women used the thread to ask for advice about how to answer complicated or difficult theological or legal questions. Some were looking for support about conclusions they had already drawn.

One woman asked, “Does anyone have a fatwa (legal ruling) that says women can recite Quran in public?” She was trying to create a collection of female reciters and had found that expert women reciters were not willing to participate. Many had asked her, “Do you have a fatwa?” So, she was looking for one. One of the women on the thread said that she would be willing to do the reciting for her, but she could not use her name. She wanted to avoid the

backlash from members of the community who considered it *haram* (prohibited). Another congratulated her on the project. She said, “There are people who have had traumatic experiences with men and cannot hear the Quran from a male voice.”

A couple of women sought discussion around explanations of Quranic verses that were considered problematic by their students. One asked about creation, especially the creation of man and woman. She quoted a book that argued that the Quran did not present a chronological process of creating man and woman. There was lukewarm response to this. One woman said, “Wasn’t Hawa (Eve) created from Adam’s rib?” and then someone asked for the title of the book. Another woman brought up a verse that spoke to the theological understanding of God, and the group responded with their interpretations, quoting from older scholars and their own teachers.

Then a woman mentioned that she had wanted to lead a family wedding (*nikkah*), knowing that there was not sacred text to prevent her, but since culturally it was not usually done, she asked the local imam for an early morning time, so as not to cause a problem. But he would not let her because, he surmised, the next step was, “She would want to be the imam for Friday prayer.” She lamented, “We are just not ready for the kinds of changes our children need to see.”

The women showed real concern for the community and the future of Muslims. One said, “We are reaching a boiling point,” about women’s issues, “so women are leaving the faith” and another responded with “Who fixes these problems?” They discussed how the community is tired of rote answers and advised one another to learn how to address historical statements that address race or gender in a problematic manner. They agreed that they needed to learn how to handle these issues in discourse. One woman reminded them to be careful, and not to deny



historical scholarship in the process, and a woman who write passionately about the crisis of youth and women then apologized and said, “I’m sorry if I seem too aggressive.”

### **Digital Religion**

The thread itself was online communication and demonstrated their willingness, in fact, eagerness, to engage with one another over new media. One woman remarked, “I’m ecstatic to be in the company of such amazing sisters. I’ve been longing for such a group.”

But they talked about their trepidation around working on other platforms. One of the older women said, “I remember when Facebook was a new and scary thing!” in response to the question, “Does anyone use Instagram?” Someone else said, “I’m scared of Instagram, lol” and she added that she had not figured out how to use it for *dawah* [teaching and calling to faith] yet. Another woman commented that Facebook and Twitter are massive platforms and overwhelming, so someone suggested she use Hootsuite (an app that will preschedule posts) but someone else said, “Unless you engage on Twitter it is not fruitful.”

Using the survey to ask direct questions, I inquired about the social media platforms that they did use. Of the 75 women, 53 had a personal Facebook page and 14 had a public profile on Facebook. Twenty-seven used Twitter, 35 used Instagram. Thirteen had their own YouTube channel and six used their organizations’ YouTube channels to post their videos. Two said they did not engage with social media at all (outside of WhatsApp), and there were a smattering of other sites and platforms in use as well.

I asked them how they thought the internet was affecting Muslim women’s religious authority. Thirty-six women said that it was a positive influence on Muslim women because it gave them more visibility and exposure. Many mentioned that men had the opportunity to learn from women and benefit from their teachings. Some also mentioned that women learners could

avoid a dominant misogynistic discourse, now that the internet had opened the door for so many women to teach online. Ten women found the internet a negative influence. They feared it undermined true scholarship because it offered a platform to anyone who would take it, and that was rarely someone truly learned. They also felt it created people with “strong convictions” who had no basis for those beliefs and opened the door to criticism of ‘real’ scholars. They complained that the internet allowed for ‘self-proclaimed scholars to “distort the picture” because they were the loudest.

Of the eleven women with a mixed review one said, “I benefited from online teaching, but it seems like the anti-women trolls are louder than the female scholars.” This was the sentiment of most of the others who were back and forth between positive and negative feelings. They felt it had the possibility of opportunity but was not being used for that now.

### **Summary of the Data**

I studied the religious leadership lives of seven Muslim women in depth. I then looked at the conversation of 75 Muslim women religious leaders. All of this analysis was to understand the phenomena of Muslim women religious leaders. What was the essence of their leadership? I discussed my research in categories that were natural results of the data.

I looked at the beginnings of their leadership, or how they got where they were today. There were many issues involved in their lives of leadership including titles and honorifics, participation in ritual and dress. I also wondered about the question of feminism and feminist action. The overwhelming response to this was a loud claim that they were not feminist, while they worked every day in feminist action. They did not label their work as feminist action, rather they labeled it as ‘work’, and ‘mission’ connected to their understanding of Islam. This was a commonality between the thread and the seven women I studied in depth. They believed that

Islam itself held the solution for issues of misogyny, sexism, and women's struggles and were resistant to any other world view, especially feminism.

Digital media was a part of everyone's life, so I sought to understand how they interacted with it as leaders. I found that it was a haphazard interaction, and that though they recognized the positive nature of the available platform, there seemed to be some feeling that it was a waste of time to be 'online' or concern for being perceived as if they were self-promoting. Again the thread corroborated findings that resulted from the netnography of the seven participants in the deeper study.

In the following chapter, I will synthesize the interviews, netnography, publications, teacher observations, and the WhatsApp thread conversation into a cohesive description of the phenomena of Muslim women's religious leadership.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Analysis, Synthesis, and Reflections**

I became part of the leadership lives of seven Muslim women teacher-leaders over the past year. They did not always know when I was listening to them or reading their words, but I was with them and thinking about them day in and day out. As I listened to their online lectures, reread my interviews with them, and read their publications, I was often moved to tears by the wisdom they exuded. I learned from them and grew because of them.

The aim of this study was to discover the lived experiences of Muslim women teacher-leaders in digital religion. I asked, “What are the lived realities of Muslim women teacher-leaders? What is the interplay of digital culture? What is the essence of their leadership?”

When I asked about the essence of their leadership, I was centered in the work of Martin Heidegger (2010) who defined phenomenology as the ability to, “let what shows itself be seen from itself.” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 32). The ability to achieve this was situated in a differentiation between the acts a person does and who a person is. Actions might change as a result of the research, indeed many of the women on the WRLN thread expressed a new way of thinking about digital media after I asked them what their involvement with it was. Actions might change, but the essence of the person remained the same.

In Chapter Four I described the data that resulted from my research. In this chapter I will take the data from the interviews, publications, online teaching lectures, netnography, and casual conversations of the WhatsApp thread and attempt to understand the phenomena of Muslim women teacher leaders in digital religion.

### **Feminism and Feminist Action**

Without exception, the women I studied did not feel comfortable with the label of feminist, though each one, including the 75 women on the WRLN thread, was concerned with and working in feminist action on a daily basis. I was frustrated and confused by this adamant declaration. It was true that Jamillah Hakim, Shehnaz Karim and Zaynab Ansari would allow the use of the word under certain conditions, but even here it was narrowly defined; they were uncomfortable with it and would not have been willing to stand on any pulpit and say, “I am a feminist.” Why not?

**Imperialist feminism.** Feminism was a broad term that included numerous epistemological categories. From liberal feminism that built its platform from a belief that the assumed inferiority of women was what stood in the way of women reaching their potential (Pasque & Errington Nicholson, 2011) to Christian feminism (Daly, 1985, Johnson, 2002, Jantzen, 1999) which argued that a gendered God had skewed theology and therefore social institutions. There was also Islamic feminism, which was a progressive religious stance that took a second look at sacred text with new methodologies, in order to parse out misogyny and create new sacred habits. It was often based in progressive and post-modern thinking (Hidayatullah, 2014, Badran, 2009). And there was also radical feminism, sometimes called black feminism, or womanism, which considered gender only part of the complicated puzzle of oppression (hooks, 2000).

Imperialist feminism (Kumar, 2015, Viner, 2002, de Matteis, 2018), the exporting of western ideas and concepts of freedom to countries with traditional values, came to Muslim countries just recovering from colonialism. It slapped on western laws and called them liberation. Pierre Bourdieu (1962) in *The Algerians* painted a sad and desperate picture of the

Algerian people as France displaced, humiliated, and oppressed the male and female citizens of Algeria. It was to broken cultures that imperialist feminism came and arrogantly offered ‘freedom’ – and it was received with bitterness. Many of the ideas behind imperialist feminism were funded by western governments and used to start wars. Women in the global south and especially Muslim women bore the brunt of that violence. Lila Abu-Lughood (2002) explored the obsession with saving Muslim women, as well as the hypocrisy inherent in this attitude in her article, *“Do Muslim women really need saving?”* She said, “We need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women.” (Abu-Lughood, 2002, pg 785). Lord Cromer was opposed to British women voting, and Laura Bush became first lady of the USA because of a conservative platform, that did not include a feminist agenda. So why did they claim to be saving Muslim women? Abu-Lughood (2002) maintained that this habit had been in place since early western interference in the region.

Marnia Lazreg (1988) identified a significant error in feminist scholarship when she identified that the gaze of feminism at women that were not part of the global north or the Christian white, was problematic for women in the global south. Raewym Connell (2016) furthered Lazreg’s argument about “Feminism’s difference problem” (Lazreg, 1988) and said, “Women in Arab countries not only had to contest with oppressive gender relations. They also had to break with the prevailing paradigm of feminist knowledge.” The hegemony of the once colonizers and now termed the global north was the global master narrative and it was the bread and butter of the knowledge economy (Connell, 2016). The politics of “saving Muslim women” appealed to western voters and donors, but it was not based in a quest to correct historical and economic wrongs. Instead “saving Muslim women” was a religio-social discussion and crusade

to ‘fix’ Muslim culture and make it more similar to Christian-white culture (Abu-Lughood, 2002).

With this background, perhaps it was not surprising that Muslim women religious leaders rejected the label of feminist. Indeed, we could ask the question, is feminism even available for practicing Muslim women?

**Feminism’s rejection of religion.** Helen Hunt, (2004) in her book, *Faith and Feminism; a Holy Alliance*, addressed the schism between feminism and Christianity. Her prosopography of five historical women who were both women of faith and early feminists attempted to reintroduce religion to feminist thought. She hoped that feminism would find its way back to inviting people who experienced God on a daily basis. The Muslim women I studied were seeking and experiencing God daily, but they had not been invited to the feminism table, at least not while they remained in faith.

The very act of wearing hijab often labeled them as “too Muslim” and therefore not participants in the great feminist work of fighting misogyny, sexism, and gender oppression. The politics of the hijab or burqa or any type of Muslim outer clothing was a primary symbol of western failure to influence Muslims (Abu-Lughood, 2002), and in the last century Muslim scholars (men and women) who identified as ‘progressive’ or ‘not-traditional’ have also jumped on the anti-hijab bandwagon with fatwas that claimed that the hijab was not a requirement for faithful Muslim women (Abou El Fadl, 2016). This went against 1400 years of scholarship, but caused confusion nonetheless. It also firmly knit western feminist rhetoric to the progressive (read: post-modern, or immoral) Muslim movement and hammered another nail into the coffin of feminism for traditional, hijab-clad Muslim women. Recently Amina Wadud, an Islamic feminist who wore hijab, then took it off, and then put it back on again, discussed her own

struggle with hijab and the academy at a conference in Scotland in the autumn of 2018. She said, “I realized I didn’t need permission to wear hijab, just like I hadn’t needed permission to take it off.” (Wadud, September 2018). This realization was rooted in the tension between traditional and ‘progressive’ Muslim thinking. The hijab was often framed as a symbol of oppression, and so to be a hijab-clad feminist was often exhausting, as those of us who do wear hijab, and also consider ourselves feminist fight to be seen amongst feminists and non-feminists as legitimate members of the intellectual community.

Joan Scott (2014) discussed a fundamental epistemological problem in feminism: the inability to include religion in the sisterhood. She pointed out that feminists divided women of practiced faith into two camps; those who are more secular than religious and so are ‘agents’ and those who are visibly religious and are ‘oppressed’. Arab women, who were often Muslim women, found this especially problematic. Women leaders like Zainab Ghazali, an Egyptian woman who was a leader within the Muslim Brotherhood, defined western feminism as a ploy to strip Muslim women from their faith (Ghazali, 1994), though she divorced her husband because he did not support her religious work (Badran, 2009)— a distinctly feminist action (insisting on male support for her work instead of giving unconditional female support for his work). Feminism preferred the “coercive state” as “guarantor of women’s liberation” (Scott, 2014, p. 160) to religious institutions or faiths, and in post-colonial dictatorships this was especially oppressive for women. And in so doing, feminism forced women (in France for example) to remove their religious garments. Certainly, in this light it made more and more sense to hear Muslim women decry feminism. It was also possible that Muslim women who practiced their faith were tired of fighting for a space of legitimacy within the feminist epistemology, and so preferred to leave the label at the door and get down to the work of leadership.



**Feminist work.** Feminist work was described by bell hooks (2015) as working for policies and programs that “end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” (hooks, 2015, p. xii). Feminist work included effort toward world peace and human possibility, economic opportunity, and political freedoms (hooks, 2015). Also at the top of the list of feminist work; a change in attitudes and beliefs about women, issues around family and parenting, sexuality and violence against women, whether domestic or state-sponsored. Feminist work included getting away from the “capitalist exploitation of the female body” (hooks, p. 2015) and a woman’s choice (usually mentioned in the abortion question but relative to other issues as well) (hooks, 2015).

Nel Noddings (1985) expanded on the description of feminist work. She also described the importance of changing attitudes but focused on the development of an ethic of caring that was rooted in a feminine view – not necessarily female. She rejected what she termed, ethics of principle because such ethics were dangerous, supported self-righteous thinking, fear, rage and hatred. These ethics were quintessentially male (Noddings, 1984). Feminist work was to develop the ethic of care and build an educational system that provided a moral education based in a relationship ethic. Feminism then, or feminist work, was to carry the responsibility of maintaining and enhancing care for one another (Nodding, 1984).

Feminist theologians expanded the work of feminism to include the interpretation of text through women’s viewpoints (Jantzen, 1999; Wadud, 1999; Hidayatullah, 2014; and others), valuing women’s spiritual experiences (Jantzen, 1999), and removing gender from the discussion of God (Daly, 1985; Johnson, 2002).

In the figure below we see the various categories of feminist work described by bell hooks, Nel Noddings, and many feminist theologians. Next, I will investigate the work of the women participants in this study for evidence of feminist action.

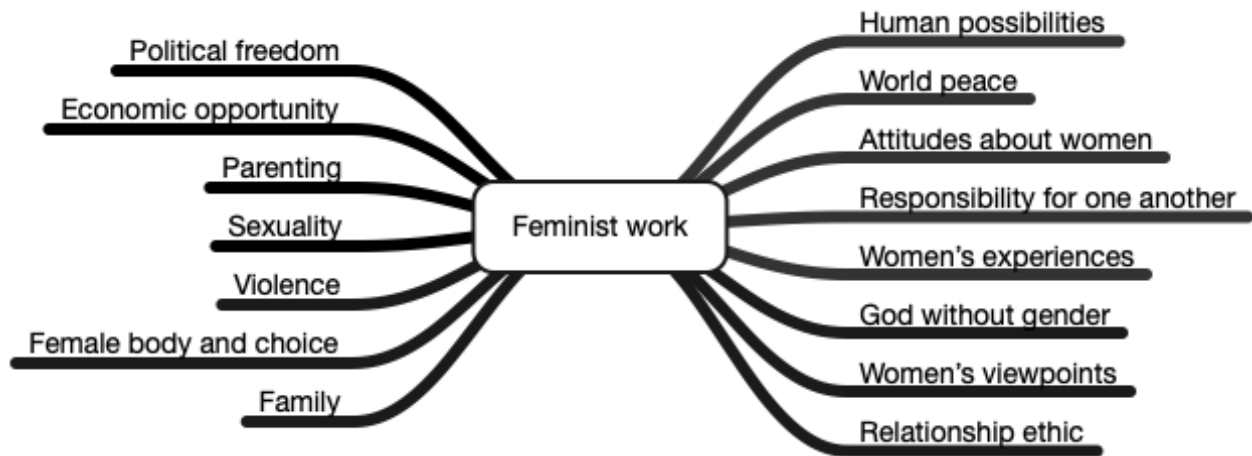


Figure 16. Mind map of feminist work or action

***Feminist work and Muslim women teacher-leaders.*** Muslim women teacher-leaders were doing feminist work every day. Zainab Alwani wrote a book about domestic violence and campaigned to end domestic violence in Muslim homes, “We noticed that we have issues and problems with families, abuse and other things. So, we decided to do something about it..” Dr. Jamillah Karim valued women’s experiences and viewpoints in both of her books and lived in and spoke about alternative families (polygynous). She addressed the value of women’s viewpoints and attitudes about (black) women, as well as parenting and family in a WhatsApp thread she was part of, referring to an inspiring conversation she had had with two important black female intellectuals, “Excited that she [a speaker] got my point that Black women found liberating the Nation of Islam’s emphasis on women staying at home to take care of their children (and husbands) because mothering was liberation for them (Morrison’s point, Mothering is freedom), Truth said, “Because Black women have never been able to fully mother.” The

funny thing is, I loved this statement so much that I almost shared it with my beloveds that very night when she said it. It really captured the point in a poetic and profound way. Three brothers expressed that this statement didn't sit well with them, while one sister stated that it did. So in reflection, I just found it interesting that there was a clear tendency for the males to question the accuracy of this statement by women about women, unable to grasp the rhetorical strategy employed by male speakers—that is, clearly we know that not every single Black woman has been deprived of full mothering but we are trying to bring to light a collective historical experience. So, it was just interesting to me that our brothers could get that with a TD Jakes and the like but not with a Jamillah Karim or a Truth Hunter. And I don't see that as a personal flaw but an indication of a larger dynamic of the way that we see and hear women scholars talk about women.” (Karim, personal communication, 2019). In one message she encapsulated six or seven categories of feminist work.

The public teaching that the seven participants participated in included a collective total of 73 talks about women and women's issues. Prime talked about attitudes toward women, the ethic of care (the importance of mercy), and world peace in a public lecture, “*Ya Rasool'Allah*. [Prophet of God] Why do you love, not tolerate, not like, not put up with, not include, but why do you love women? He said, ‘because of their mercy.’ Why should that matter to you? When we live in an age where war is rampant. When we live in an age that we have lost our humanity... If you want the mercy of Allah *Subhanahu wa ta'ala* to descend upon this Ummah, we've got to honor the Sunnah of honoring the woman.” (Rismultimedia, 2018). She was doing feminist work but making sure not to call it feminism or herself a feminist. Her 45-minute talk ran the gamut of feminist issues. She addressed sexism at the mosque, the status of mothers and motherhood, and the importance of female scholarship and women's voices.

Ansari's publications addressed feminist issues of women's viewpoints, human possibility, sexism at the mosque, and family. She was thinking about her own role in society and using feminist literature to help her reorient as a widowed single mother. She also did the feminist work of standing in positions where communities expected to see men and holding her ground. She dealt with seminary students that did not want to learn from her because she was a woman, "They decided from the first week of the seminary not to take my classes... my instinct told me it was a little bit more than [a time inconvenience] and as time wore on they were taking the classes with all the male instructors, it just became... it became really evident that there was something else going on."

Karani's writing and speaking addressed feminist issues of family, parenting, and valuing women. S. Karim debuted on Facebook Live with a public lecture about menstruation, discussing women's bodies and other feminist issues. Her work, standing next to her husband as teacher even as they both wondered how their elders would feel about it, was feminist work of valuing women's education and viewpoints. And Krausen lived feminist work in her position as Imam, theological discussions about the creation of humanity, and her status as a sheikha of the Chisti tariqa.

Jamillah Karim was at a park watching her children, during our interview. The transcript is riddled with "do you want to ride on that? Ok that's fine" and other mothering interruptions. Mothering was feminist work.

Zainab Alwani had to take a break from our conversation in order to watch her grandchild. She was doing feminist work.

Ieasha Prime said that the reason she started teaching online was that her students wanted to continue studying with her when she moved. She was teaching women. She started two

separate organizations, both focused on the education and religious literacy of Muslim women. This was feminist work.

Zaynab Ansari shut the door to her office so that the children's playing wouldn't bother us. She was getting up to put them to bed at the end of our interview. This was feminist work.

Shehnaz spoke about menstruation as a spiritual state and Kaltun spoke about hijab as an empowering act. This was feminist work.

Halima Krausen was lauded by Islamic feminists for her role as Imam of the Hamburg mosque, and she described that job as "counseling, relationships, answering questions," which was also feminist work.

On the WRLN thread the women spoke about their own feminist work. They spoke of the sexual rights of women, gendered barriers and how to remove them, patriarchy, family, and duty to community, to name a few.

All seven women and the 75 women on the WhatsApp thread spent their days working in feminist action. What was the skill or way of knowing that made it possible for Muslim women religious leaders to step aside from the term 'feminism' while at the same time embracing feminist work (albeit without calling it feminist)? For that I turned to Aristotle's theory of knowledge.

### **Knowing, Doing, and Discerning**

The first two hundred years following the advent of Islam were considered foundational years. It was during this time that the majority of Islamic sciences were formalized. It was also during these years that nearly the entire corpus of Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic (McGinnes & Reisman, 2007). This is not the space to discuss the influence of Greek

philosophy on Islamic thinking, nor the early debates around philosophical issues, but the fact is nonetheless significant.

The importance of knowledge in Islam cannot be exaggerated, and many early Muslim philosophers grappled with categories and definitions of knowledge. Aristotle's theories of knowledge were reflected in ibn Sina's (Avicenna) three types of knowledge, and Aristotle himself was considered the first teacher (*al mu'allim al-awwal*) (Ibrahim, 2014). Al-Farābi (d. 950) was called '*al mu'allem al-thani*' (the second teacher) because of his great skill at Aristotelean logic. His translation and commentary of Aristotle's work included the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and it was here that Aristotle described his theory of knowledge. al-Ghazzali, Ibn Rushd, and al-Farābi all discussed and interpreted Aristotle's theory of knowledge (Ibrahim, 2014). This historical cross over of culture was useful as I looked for the essence of leadership in Muslim women's global lives.

### **Aristotle's Theory of Knowledge**

Aristotle's five types of knowledge were *epistemé*, *techné*, *nous*, *sophia*, and *phronesis*. *Epistemé* was scientific knowledge or that which was True regardless of context. *Techné* referred to knowing how to create or make something, to do it and accomplish it. *Nous* and *sophia* were difficult to separate but referred to an intellectual grasp and wisdom. Finally, *phronesis*, which was a combination of intellectual prowess and moral skill, was the greatest of all knowledge and belonged to leaders (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI).

**Epistemé and Muslim women teacher-leaders.** Aristotle described five approaches to knowledge in *The Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI. The first was *epistemé*, which in modern understanding is often translated as scientific knowledge, but for Aristotle *epistemé* was knowledge that was eternal, universal, and did not change based on context (*Nicomachean*

Ethics, Book VI). In Islamic knowledge, and for the purpose of this study, this would apply to the memorization of the Quran and the hadith. For early Muslim thinkers, epistemé included sacred and scientific knowledge and was translated into the Arabic word, *`ilm* (Morewedge, 2014). It would apply to knowing Arabic grammar, Islamic sciences, and even the intellectual aspect of the science of spirituality (Sufism).

For the women in this study, seeking *`ilm* was an important part of becoming a leader. They had varying levels of epistemé. Some had doctorate degrees from western institutions, others had more than 50 years of travel and study, and some of those were combined with academic degrees. Still, they struggled with issues of legitimacy. They wrote in their subject areas, were eloquent and effectual speakers/ teachers /preachers, yet the question of their expertise remained.

The women on the thread discussed at length how to gain credibility. They talked about the ‘types of scholarship necessary’ in order to gain legitimacy as a gender. They were thinking about questions of epistemé; there was a call for a generalist (defined by how much she knew), a secular specialist and a specialist in particular Islamic topics. All of these were defined by her level of knowledge.

The women I studied were no longer deep within the learning stage, but they told tales of travel and challenges they had faced to achieve the knowledge that they had. They had taken tests, written papers, gained degrees, status had been conferred upon them by teachers, and still their epistemé was questionable, or at least they felt that it was. Jamillah Karim was pleased that the men in the WhatsApp thread would listen to her, and she attributed that to her reputation as ‘submissive and religious’. But one wonders why she wasn’t listened to because she had a PhD from a preeminent university in the USA in Islamic studies. Zainab Alwani and Zaynab Ansari

considered skipping the leadership retreat they had been invited to because they did not feel that their opinions were valued by their male colleagues, though Alwani had a lifetime of learning and degrees behind her, and Ansari grew up in the middle of deep and extensive learning.

The question of legitimacy and influence was one that connected back to epistemé. Historically leadership was gained as a result of a *sanad* or chain of teaching that students could demonstrate. This chain was suspect where women were concerned (did she actually sit with and learn from her predecessor?). Academic programs were outside of this traditional chain, and sometimes the curriculum programs at Muslim institutions that women studied were actually less rigorous than the programs in place for men (Saffiyya Dhorat, personal communication, 2018). Nonetheless, the women I studied persevered in increasing their epistemé and demonstrating that knowledge in their public teaching and publications.

**Techné and Muslim women teacher-leaders.** Aristotle's second way of knowing was techné, the Greek origin of today's 'technology' and in Arabic early thinkers called it *sinā'ah*, which means to make or produce a thing (Morewedge, 2014). Techné was concerned with bringing something into being. It was often termed the knowledge of artisans or craftspeople. Aristotle said, "the practice of an art is the study of how to bring into being something that is capable either of being or of not being.... (it) operates in the sphere of the variable." (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, 1140a1-23). Heidi Campbell noted in the introduction of her book *When Religion Meets New Media*, that "Religion involves a system of cultural practices that are informed by a distinctive model of reality." (Campbell, 2007, p. 7). Such an understanding impacted how people lived and so religion "possesses the ability to transform people's conceptions of the everyday world and provides a basis for justifying those actions and understanding of reality." (Campbell, 2007, p. 7). The women teacher-leaders whom I



interviewed were aware of the power of digital media to impact the way people lived. They understood that it offered women an opportunity never before available, and that they could reach wide audiences through its various platforms. They also had internalized suspicion around being 'online', and felt it was last in a long line of priorities. Halima Krausen told me that she "does not speak to cameras," and emphasized the importance of face to face encounters. Dr. Alwani said she did not have time to manage her online life because she did not have an assistant. Ieasha Prime said she would 'like to get better' at social media, but she did not have a blog, or post on her Facebook page -in fact she was not the one who opened the page.

Shehnaz Karim also professed a desire to 'improve' in her online presence. In fact, she said, "I need to, I'm in the middle of it, like I'm in the programming. It's in process because I need to, there is a plan to have my own Facebook page and ... podcast or something like that." Three months later, she still did not have her own online presence, but she was still planning to do it. It was important, she said, for the work. "I'm thinking about it in terms of making sure that there are women, you know, speaking in a serious way and teaching in a committed and serious and regular way about some of the classic or foundational aspects of Islam, but using a language that can connect to people in our time and using, you know, examples my teachers have given me of practical ways to express and apply our faith, and it's important to be like a player in that scene because there aren't enough right now. And that's the concern that so many women and men have raised, that we don't see enough. So right now, it is a matter of just being present, at least, to contribute to some kind of renaissance so that when people are searching online, there are enough people to catch them in that, and connect to each other and to really make sure there is a healthy presence of women speaking to both men and women. And people go online to look for that so to make sure that they can find what they might be looking for."

Why were they not successful online? Was it a lack of *techné*? Only Kaltun Karani interacted with social media with positive feelings about posting, but in her case her blog was not up to date, and many opportunities for online leadership had not been taken.

None of the seven women had an active YouTube channel. Only Shehnaz used her organization's channel to some effect, and that was because someone else was responsible for maintaining it.

They were all missing out on controlling their message online. Though each had a clear message that came through in careful reading and listening, none of them had cultivated a channel or singular blog, or website that asserted their message. If *techné* was bringing something into being, and if digital media skills brought leadership into being, we clearly saw that they needed support and/or knowledge around how to manage their leadership within the scope of digital religion.

The women at the WRLN thread were also clearly in need of *techné* in the realm of social media. Their discussions about Facebook and Twitter consisted mostly in posting event posters. They seemed to have little understanding about how to engage or use the medium in order to further their personal vision or mission.

*Communication skills as techné.* The use of digital media was part of the communication of leadership. So, I asked myself, why did they struggle to effectively utilize the available tools? Were they poor communicators?

Charteris-Black (2007) used Goffman's (1956) theory of performance and his use of drama as a backdrop to his linguistic analysis of how leaders communicate their leadership to their followers. The dramaturgical work of Goffman (1956) looks at the "arts of impression management" (Goffman, 1956 p. 132), which included issues of belonging, discipline,

circumspection and information control. All of these, plus others, were creatively woven into Charteris-Black's analytical tool of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies.

His analytical framework examined verbal communication as represented in vision and values, metaphor, legitimacy and belonging and other stylistic features of the leader's communication style. Here we learned what verbal methods the leader used to present her leadership to her public. Charteris-Black also analyzed non-verbal communication in the form of appearance, artifacts, dress and body language and symbolic actions that communicated the leader's message without words. His analytical formula will help us to answer the question of whether the lack of interaction with digital media was a communication problem.

*Appearance and dress.* The seven women teacher-leaders all wore a conservative version of hijab. Jamillah Karim wore her scarf looser than others and sometimes showed her ears, but these were intentional non-verbal communications of relevance. Ieasha Prime wore a traditional scarf and sometimes added earrings. Her clothing was often 'ethnic' or representative of a vague 'Middle Eastern' feel or style. She was communicating her connection to traditional knowledge. As a black woman, this style of dress defined her as unique from the traditional path of the Nation of Islam that so many others followed to Sunni Islam. It communicated her relationships to other lines of knowing outside of western academia or teachings from Warith Deen Muhammad. Dr. Zainab Alwani spoke about her intentionality in wearing business style suits at times. Her clothing did not represent her Iraqi background, but rather she appeared in what she hoped was the image of a practicing Muslim woman. Kaltun was intentional in offering options through her style of hijab as well, and she traded in the traditional Somali hijab for a less culturally defined wrap scarf. She also mentioned that she had stopped wearing makeup. She was communicating her status as a leader in this decision; the frivolity of makeup did not match

the status she was attempting to communicate. Shehnaz Karim dressed in the image of the teachers she had learned from, and Zaynab Ansari did not. Both of these were intentional. Shehnaz claimed that this was the only ‘language’ (the language of dress) that she knew, and Zaynab claimed that she was not worthy of it. Halima Krausen communicated her attachment to traditional scholarship with the conservative style of hijab that she wore. The fact that she prayed as imam immediately made her suspect as a ‘progressive Muslim’, but her scarf communicated otherwise.

All seven were very good at using their appearance and dress to communicate their very selves to their audiences and students.

*Artifacts and symbolic actions.* Jamillah Karim held and read from an Ebony magazine at her ISNA talk about Muhammad Ali, the message of her talk was directed at the mostly immigrant audience and it was about elevating the memory of Mohammad Ali and recognizing his role in American life. It was about love between communities and following in the footsteps of both the boxer and the prophet. The magazine identified her as a black woman with a connection to black culture. When Karim gave her husband permission to take a second wife, and then publicly spoke about finding it within herself to love his second wife, she was communicating a symbolic action. Her message was all about coming together and excellence of character. This symbolic action underlined that message.

Zainab Alwani read from her father’s last will and testament at the opening of the Islamic American Seminary, of which she was one of the founders. It was both an artifact and a symbolic action meant to communicate the continuation of his work through her person, the work that she did, and the work that the seminary and the journal would do.

Shehnaz wore a large scarf like a wrap over her shoulders and over the overcoat which she wore as part of her hijab. I asked her why she wore it, and she did not have a comprehensive answer, but she was an introvert whose message was around coming close to God. The artifact of that extra scarf seemed to be like a walking hug and a protective covering. She was communicating a sense of coziness in faith and a sense of autonomy at the same time.

When Zaynab Ansari's husband died, she rose and spoke at the eulogy. She said that this was a symbolic action meant to communicate that Muslim marriages are love marriages. It was highly unusual for a woman to go out at all, and almost unheard of for her to speak at her husband's funeral, but for Zaynab it was a symbolic action attached back to her life's work of leadership.

When Kaltun graduated with her second Bachelor of Arts, an online degree from a non-accredited though popular Islamic institution, she flew to the graduation, took pictures and posted them online. This was a symbolic action which communicated her new status as one who had completed a course of learning and can now teach. The pictures, placed strategically on social media, were artifacts of the event.

Ieasha Prime wore clothing that indicated a connection to 'original sources', but she also often wore earrings that communicated a connection to the black American experience. These artifacts communicated a continued connection, even while she communicated something else with the rest of her dress.

Halima Krausen was given a pen and draped in a white shawl the day of her small home ceremony wherein she was dubbed a 'sheikha' of her tariqa. The pen and the shawl indicated the giving of knowledge and the status of sheikh(a), and the draping of the white shawl was a symbolic action that indicated a handing over of authority.

All seven women used these nonverbal communicative devices - dress, appearance, artifacts and symbolic actions to great effect. Their non-verbal communication skills were strong. What of their verbal skills?

*Verbal communication.* Charteris-Black (2007) concluded that leaders with strong verbal communication skills were able to verbalize vision and values, use metaphor, and communicate legitimacy and belonging. Muslim leaders need Arabic in order to communicate legitimacy and belonging and no matter what each woman reported about their own language skills, each used Arabic in her lectures and writings. They were communicating their legitimacy through the use of the language of the Quran.

I was able to glean a clear central message from the publications and lectures that I studied. Considering that for most of the lectures the women were guests, with a topic handed to them, it was a sign of their verbal communication skills that they were able to hold to the central message of their work. Ansari called for a return of female scholarship and learning, Alwani for her Quranic methodology, J. Karim to come together in excellence of behavior, S. Karim to avoid turning religion into a list of tasks, to go deeply into a relationship with God, Krausen to connect with the deep theological message of Islam and to avoid stagnation, Prime to fight misogyny and racism, and Karani to improve oneself in order to be a better Muslim.

Was this vision? We recognize vision in the visual results of someone's work. Kaltun was studying counseling and trying to prepare herself to work as a life coach. Kareem and Prime ran organizations that worked to put their message into practice. Ansari and Alwani were professional teachers - Ansari at a seminary and Alwani at a university - where they produced students who learned their methodology (Alwani specifically said that she taught her methodology to all of her students, whether Muslim or any other faith), and just plain learned

from them (in Ansari's case this was part of her mission, to bring back the voice of women to scholarship – her voice was now present). Krausen lived her vision of leadership “without much fuss” and Kareem lived her vision of radical love very publicly. So yes, it was vision.

We are left with metaphor. Were they skilled at metaphor? For that we return to their lectures and publications. In truth, language and metaphor go hand in hand. Much of our expression is rooted in metaphor. So, the question is are they using large metaphors? Are they communicating with metaphors effectively? We see the metaphor of religious life as joy and happiness in the work of Shehnaz Karim and Jamillah Kareem, and they both expressed a desire to communicate that. Zainab Alwani and Halima Krausen, the two most serious academics, used the least metaphor in their writings and speeches, but both of them presented the metaphor of parental love as the work of scholars and leaders. Karani and Ansari used metaphor to explain more complicated points, and Prime used metaphor when she called herself the womb of humankind in a poem that she read at an event in 2016.

Using the analytical tool of communication in leadership designed by Charteris-Black (2007), we see that the seven women were effective communicators. So why weren't they using digital media? Why were they effectively ‘passing the mic’?

***Missing techné.*** There was a missing techné of leadership that was inexplicable. They were online, of course, but none of them were using it to affect change in community. It was accidental, haphazard, or downright poor management.

In order to understand religion on the internet, we need to know what was on the internet, who put it there, and for what purpose (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 10). In the case of the seven women I studied, it was dozens of pages of a Google search. But those who had posted their videos, articles, and event posters were not usually the women themselves. Most

often the purposes of the postings that were on the internet were connected to advertisement for an organization not connected to the teacher-leaders.

This in spite of research telling us that women are better than men at social networking and social media (Erçetin & Bisaso, 2016). And though the women I studied did not take control of their online persona, they had benefitted in predictable ways. Erçetin and Bisaso (2016) surveyed social science research focusing on women's use of new media and found that while social media offered women an opportunity to build a voice, expand connection opportunities, and benefit from a virtual office, it also had negative aspects. Of the six possible negative effects listed by Erçetin and Bisaso (2016) the second, "self-exposure" was connected to the rooted desire for privacy that Nadwi mentioned as one of the impediments to discovering historical Muslim women scholars' and teachers' biographical information. It was possible that underlying the women's reticence to spend time and effort on social media was connected to a desire for privacy that was difficult to shake. Did this connect back to the sense of anonymity that Sheikh Nadwi talked about when he blamed the lack of information about women scholars on a tendency for privacy amongst Muslim women? Will his difficulty in discovering women scholars of history be repeated because women of today are still hiding, albeit in plain sight?

The third negative aspect of social media was the propensity for wasting time, something all seven of the women I studied had an aversion to, and the women on the WRLN network suspected social media of. The fourth negative aspect was that, in order to use it to full effect the user needed to "Understand how it works, when and how to use it and what channels to focus on depending on your end goal of using social media." (Erçetin & Bisasa, 2016, p. 134) In other words, techné. Without techné of internet use, it was difficult to use it to full effect.



It was also possible that women were just too busy solving the day-to-day problems of the people in their communities, taking care of family, studying and teaching to devote much time to digital media. I wondered about the Christian women (part of the majority society) who were able to cultivate 25 million followers. Were they more intelligent, better communicators, or more spiritual than the women I studied? What about Muslim men and the millions of followers they were cultivating? Were they worthier of followers by virtue of their background or gender? A dubious question, to say the least.

Muslim women teacher-leaders had rich layers of epistemé but lacked techné in digital media.

**Nous and sophia and Muslim women teacher-leaders.** Understanding was wrapped up in both nous and sophia. Nous was intelligence or awareness (*'aql* in Arabic) (Morewedge, 2014) and Sophia was the excellence of thought that comes from epistemé and nous used together (*hikmah* in Arabic) (Morewedge, 2019). Nous was a difficult word to understand in English, but Islamic thinking expressed in Arabic had a related concept, *ma'rifa*, which was to come to an awareness or knowledge of a thing by the grace of God. It was a deeper understanding that did not come from book learning, but rather from a knowing that was indescribably by human measures and a divine gift. Sophia then was a combination of learning the Truth of things (epistemé) along with an awareness of those things, one might say a reflective consciousness, which was a term coined by Fritz Capra (2002) to express self-awareness, in order to arrive at a type of wisdom, sometimes coined as 'theoretical wisdom' since it had to do with thinking about the things that we know and gaining understanding through the process of that thought. In Islamic practice this was termed *fikr*.

Jamillah Karim spoke of a *ma'rifa* when she spoke about radical love. It was a divine gift given to her at a moment of pain. Her ability to recognize this knowing was a moment of *sophia*, or reflective consciousness. She wrote, "I am reminded of the moment when I realized that love was the reward for *ihsan*. I mean really realized it, and I began to do so the moment when from the outside, it appeared that I had lost out on the pursuit of love as the world sees it. I was experiencing this unseen love between God and me, which many people would expect, given that we turn to Allah in hardship. But what was mind-blowing was the human love that suddenly overflowed in my direction. That even I had not anticipated. In God's mercy and loving kindness, He not only makes His Love tangible, but He gives His Love through actual people. And the best of people through whom He showers His love is His Beloved (S)." (Karim, 2018).

Historical Sufis wrote much about the type of knowledge that came to them and in fact they split knowledge into that which a human might learn, and that which was inspired by God ('Isa, 2009). J. Karim was the only teacher-leader who publicly wrote or spoke about such knowledge.

**Phronesis and Muslim women teacher-leaders.** Phronesis was Aristotle's attempt at explaining what happened when intellectual capacity and moral capacity combined into action. In Islamic thought as expressed in the Arabic language, this would be *ihsan*. Phronesis was the ability to know (*epistemé* and perhaps *techné*, and even better if it included *nous* and *sophia*), and to deliberate, based on this knowing, what was right and good based on moral values. It was ethical knowledge combined with intellectual acumen. This was a highly contextual action and so included an amount of strategy and forward thinking. Aristotle considered political abilities and thinking abilities to be wrapped up in phronesis. He also designated virtue in household management as a sign of someone with phronesis (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI). As a Greek

philosopher, he would have been referring to men as household managers, but in our modern context it would be mostly women who fit this description.

The teacher-leaders in my study had impeccable phronesis. It was manifested in the words they said, the decisions they made, and the leadership lives they lived. Jamillah Karim spoke about the necessity for *ihsan*, invoked it as a cure for racism between Muslim community members (Karim, 2009), and lived it as a leader on her WhatsApp thread. She thought carefully before speaking. She said on the WhatsApp thread she participated on as both leader and student, “My ego was a little bruised yesterday. However, I believe, that by waiting and writing what I wrote today, it was not from a place of ego, but reflection on how women scholars are engaged. InshaAllah later I can share more on my reflection.” Her phronesis, *ihsan*, was part of her life, her writings, and her leadership. In that particular interchange, she used phronesis to pause, and then send a long discussion that demonstrated how Muslim men have listened to the same argument from men but were not willing to listen to it from women. She did this to create change. To lead the men into thinking differently about women scholars.

Zainab Alwani had knowledge of the Quran that was beyond typical memorization and *tafsīr*. She had an understanding of the Quran as a whole and the ability to see it as one large piece instead of as individual verses. This gave her both an *epistēmé* about the Quran that was unparalleled and a living phronesis based in the Quran that manifested itself in her commitment to leadership. When the annual scholars retreat rolled around in 2018, Alwani was not planning on attending, but as soon as she saw the issues that were to be discussed, she changed her plans. Her phronesis, *ihsan*, dictated the necessity for her to be present.

This ability to see where to be, what to do, and what to say, without ego, but with confidence, was the ultimate phronesis.

When, after her participation in the women's march, Ieasha Prime said loud and clear at the RIS conference and on the Imanwire podcast, "I am not a feminist", she was using her phronesis of leadership to communicate with her audience the important issues of women's oppression while recognizing the multi-layered problematic term feminism. She wanted to be heard for the points she made and seen for the work she did, not labeled so that she could be dismissed.

Halima Krausen, who held the position of imam for 20 years at the Hamburg mosque, used phronesis in dealing with her congregants. She had epistemé, knowledge of the validity of the prayer, techné about prayer (or so we assume because she was given this job by her teacher), and her phronesis was demonstrated in her desire for full acceptance before praying. She said to me, "If just one person gives me the side eye, I give it to someone else." She was concerned with the larger picture of relationships and people's feelings. She deliberated every prayer. She made the decision without ego. Recognizing the state of society, she let leadership of the prayer go in favor of holding onto leadership of the community.

Zaynab Ansari was nearly absent on social media and expressed a frustration with the speed and tone of comments in places such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Nonetheless, when she posted her controversial 2015 article about spiritual abuse, she was actively responding to comments that challenged the validity of her article. Her phronesis overcame her reticence for online posting as she recognized the importance of the article, and the need to stem erroneous negativity in the ensuing pages of comments.

Shehnaz Karim, as both director of the non-profit organization founded by her and her husband and a spiritual mentor for the community members, spoke of her need to use knowledge of managerial techniques and her Islamic ethics. She worked on using phronesis so that she

could both manage the organization and guide and lead her followers, “If I were falling apart and I couldn't fulfill what I promised I would do, for me, my natural thing is I need to go and just take some time with Allah and maybe read the Quran, just get things fixed in my head.” S. Karim connected her spiritual level to her ability to apply phronesis, “I'm trying to be, like I need to learn how to be a better manager. It's not enough for them to see me as a teacher,” which was Aristotle's point precisely.

Finally, Kaltun Karani also demonstrated phronesis in her work. She spoke about trauma in her early childhood. She had a babysitter who constantly told her “You can't do this Kaltun, you are not good enough, you are nothing, you're lazy, you are not good at anything.” And her voice reverberated in Karani's head even today. But she overcame this negativity with hard work and phronesis. She “lowered the volume” of criticism choosing her own God-given potential over the negativity of her inner voice. She learned to make good decisions for herself, which led to good decisions for her students. It was her phronesis a combination of intellectual capability and virtue that pushed her every day to be the best leader she could be.

Phronesis was the ability to deliberate on what was good and advantageous. For Aristotle phronesis implied knowledge, the virtue of the intellect, nous and Sophia, wisdom and understanding, along with a general theme of moral virtue (Tenkasi & Hay, 2017). Al-Farābi interpreted Aristotle's phronesis in this way, “Someone who is discerning (has phronesis) is someone who deliberates well when deducing the *virtuous* acts he should perform at the moment he acts, in one situation after another, when that person also has a virtuous disposition.” (Al Farābi, 2007). He said that intelligence was measured only insofar as how much a virtuous person used his phronesis to perform virtuous deeds and avoid evil ones (Al-Farābi, 2007).

The women teacher-leaders demonstrated phronesis in many aspects of their lives, but none quite so obvious as their decision to distance themselves from the term ‘feminism’. The term was problematic and implied a number of problematic nuances that the women had no need to deal with. They simply dropped the term and the label and went forth to the work of leadership.

### **Feminism and Aristotle’s Theory of Knowledge**

Aristotle’s theory of knowledge was one way to explain the insistence of all of the Muslim women teacher-leaders to avoid the label ‘feminist’, while they spent most of their time in feminist work. We saw that they had great epistemé coupled with sophia and nous, but that they still struggled with legitimacy issues in leadership. We recognized their lack of techné regarding digital religion. We saw in the production of their publications, and in the stories they told, a narrative of the work of feminism – or feminist action. Though they did not label it in that way. And in phronesis we saw a strategic decision not to use the word feminism. It did not help them to further their cause, so they did not allow the generic label. Was it this simple though? Was it just a matter of phronesis? Or was something else also at play?

### **Chaos and the Fractal of Origins**

Muslim women’s lives were fraught with chaos in the last four centuries. Colonialism, post-colonial dictatorships, civil wars, corruption, orientalism, and islamophobia suffocated us while sexism, gender bias, identity crises, racism, poverty, greed, ignorance, and a crisis of family engulfed us. Yet out of the chaos bloomed women in leadership. We saw government-sponsored initiatives to create a women’s religious leadership profession in Morocco, Turkey, and the UAE. We saw a history of women’s leadership and teaching organizations, we met seven women struggling to lead every day of their lives, and 75 women leaning on one another to

perfect their own leadership. Muslim women's religious leadership was alive and well in Muslim communities.

Chaos theory taught us that biological systems had a core system that manifested itself in the fractal or pattern of its existence. When used to explain and understand social systems, chaos theory informed us that when things seem horribly chaotic and messy, when things seem at their worst, it was at this time that the fractal that defined the pattern of the system would appear (Wheatley, 2006). The fractal of Muslim women's leadership was connected to the early days when there had been natural scholarship and leadership held by women. This early fractal of leadership was showing itself now that the Muslim community had reached what one of the women on the WRLN thread called, "a breaking point where women are leaving the faith." It was now that we were seeing the fractal, the pattern. The pattern was that women were in leadership and they were an important part of ethical upbringing of Muslim communities.

A positivist approach to human behavior was challenged by researchers who either recognized the limits of seeking a single Truth or became cognizant of oppressive policies that can result from research based in the experiences of one population (white middle-class men, for example) but built for another (women of any class or race). Traditional science, for many years, supported the positivist approach to research in human behavior, because it taught that slight variances converge, differences balance out and qualitative data can be used to determine a fairly accurate picture of what might happen next in a particular scenario. However, complexity theory, along with mathematics, in recent decades challenged this concept of reality. Fritjof Capra (2002) in his book *The Hidden Connections* described a new scientific theory, complexity theory, that changed how we see the world and then demonstrated how it could be applied to

social questions. The theory was based on an understanding of life that was contained in autopoiesis and a dissipative structure.

### **Autopoiesis**

Autopoiesis or 'self-making' in biology is the simple idea that cellular life is constantly changing based on the interaction between the physical boundary of the cell and the metabolic processes which engage in the 'environment.' The whole network of the cell is constantly regenerating itself. We can apply the idea of autopoiesis to social systems. Luhman (1990) said that communication is central to social systems. Communication does the autopoietic work for a society. Communication is not simply words, however, but an entire context of meaning that is connected to expectations, loyalties, shared context etc. (Capra 2002). If we consider that feminism originated in western societies in the nineteenth century, just when colonialism was at its height, and that during that time Muslim peoples and especially women were subjected to oppression and a reflective consciousness of oppression at the hands of those same westerners, we begin to understand the negative connotations and restraints of the term feminism for Muslim women.

Reflective consciousness is an awareness of self that is determined not only by the self but also by the social conditions in which one lives (Capra, 2002). Muslim women were subjected to orientalist stereotyping throughout the cultures of the colonial powers, a subjection that manifested itself in literature (*Frankenstein*), policy (Algeria) and numerous lived realities of oppression (i.e. women who suffered the violence of war). We understand why the term feminism carried with it a negative and oppressive meaning, instead of the positive sense of liberation that western (white) women defined it as. In plain terms, we were asking Muslim



women to use a term designed and defined by the very culture that subjugated and oppressed them.

The seven women I studied and all of the 75 women on the MWLN thread were concerned with women's issues, agency, and voice, but none of them accepted the term feminism as an element of emancipation. Instead, they spoke about fighting sexism and misogyny, going back to true Islam, living the Prophetic message, etc. The autopoiesis of the group rejected a metabolic process that interacted with their oppressor. In the regeneration of 'self' to deal with modern (feminist) issues, they allowed words such as sexism and misogyny, but the term feminism, though part of the environment, was not a part of the self that could be regenerated. It was not part of the original fractal of existence.

### **Dissipative Structures and the Fractal of Origin**

Ilya Prigogine won a Nobel Prize in 1977 for his description of dissipative structures. In simple terms he discovered that there were physical and chemical systems that were far from equilibrium but nonetheless appeared to develop order out of chaos and seemed to be self-organizing (Prigogine & Stengers, 2017). This was a breakthrough in modern science because it seemed to flatten space and time (Toffler, 2017). These ideas were used to understand social systems and organizations in new ways. The concept of fractals and DNA of organizations helped sociologists to understand seeming chaos as a self-organizing problem. So, for example, if you shake (add energy) to a dish of cornstarch and water it will begin to act differently. Instead of a pure liquid it will begin to act like a moving solid. It will become something new that is connected to its original state (originally the cornstarch was a solid). The modern political problem in Europe, Brexit, seemed like a state of chaos to much of the world, but if we use the model of a dissipative structure to help us understand it, we see that energy (new immigration

and a shaky economy) was added to the society, and the country that was the colonialist was becoming colonized. So it began to self-organize and become something new – which in practical terms was still unclear at this writing.

### **Dissipative Structures and Muslim Women Teacher-Leaders**

Muslim women teacher-leaders insisted that they were not feminist, but rather that they rooted themselves in Islam to fight sexism, misogyny, and the oppression of women. Feminist action sought to create a new society, to change the pattern of women's subjugation, but Muslim women were not seeking something new, they were seeking an original state. They were adding energy – publications, speaking, classes, events – to the Muslim global community in hopes that it might begin to return to the original fractal of existence, that they could bring forth the original generation albeit with modern tones, and self-correct their society.

### **Digital Media as Catalyst for Leadership**

Chaos theory tells us that a disturbance, or some form of energy, must shake the system enough in order to bring forth its true fractal form. In the case of Muslim women's religious leadership, I needed to recognize a disturbance – or a generative force, something that affected the state of Muslim women's religious leadership so that the autopoiesis and dissipative structure would begin in order to renew itself and become something that was both new and connected to its origin story. Here I postulate that the internet was the disturbance, the energy, or the catalyst that formed this model of leadership.

Gary Bunt (2003) began a discussion about Islam in cyber Islamic environments (CIE) with his book, *Islam in the digital Age: e-Jihad, online fatwas and cyber Islamic environments*. In the introduction to this book Bunt reflected on what would happen to Islam if the internet disappeared, his answer – nothing. Nothing would happen to Islam but the work of

organizations and the “extensive application of the internet as a means of projecting Muslim authority and disseminating religious opinions” would be greatly affected (Bunt, 2003, p. 2). He defined cyber Islamic environments as a “broad range of Muslim expressions” that articulated values, posted religious sermons, offered news, and created the ability to chat and network.

The earliest opportunity widely available for people to use for communicating authority and disseminating information through the internet was email and news-group style websites. Anna Piela (2012) studied newsgroups and email lists which were in operation between 2001 and 2006 and she claimed, “The newsgroups discussed in this book may indeed be the first forum where Muslim women from all walks of life across the globe can come together as an almost anonymous collective weaving a hyper-quilt consisting of diverse interpretations of Islamic texts and issues faced by the participants in their localized contexts.” (Piela, 2012, p. 7). She was describing the first generative force that began to change the very essence of Muslim women’s religious leadership.

This force – the internet- changed how women led, as online religion and religion online morphed into digital religion, Muslim women religious leaders were changing.

We mentioned, in chapter two, a long line of historical Muslim women who were religious leaders. Women like Aisha bint Abu Bakr, Amrat bint Abd al-Rahman, Nafisa al-Tahira, and Nana Asmā’u were not anomalies but part of a rich history of women who wore the shoes of religious leadership in community.

Nadwi (2007) said that the twentieth century was the worst for women leaders. He suggested that the reasons for that were connected to the influence of colonialism, post-colonial dictatorships, western attitudes towards women etc... but ultimately, he blamed the *ulama* for the poor showing of Muslim women religious leaders and scholars (Nadwi, 2018).

It was near the end of the twentieth century that the internet began to rush like a tsunami into people's lives. I remember living in Syria in the 90s when we got our dial-up connection. I followed email lists about housecleaning and childrearing until I discovered websites about education. Then the cell phone arrived with its ability to send text-messages. I was one of the first to buy a cell phone in Syria, thanks to my tech savvy friend who was the first woman to study computer science in Damascus. The government tried to control our access to websites and social media sites, but soon the teenagers taught us 'over 30s' how to bypass all of that and the internet had arrived.

The reaction of most of the Muslim scholars at the time was one of fear, wariness, suspicion, and mistrust. We students of Islam were warned away from wasting time, giving too much information, and most specifically, the dreaded photo. Photos on the internet were highly questionable, who knew what people would do with them? While I was soaking up these attitudes toward the internet in general, Muslims in western countries were building CIEs in order to disseminate their particular thinking about Islam. One of the more famous fatwa sites hired young Muslim converts to write answers to people's questions about Islam (personal communication, 2016). The internet guaranteed nothing in the world of accuracy, or authority.

The internet then shook the structure of female Muslim leadership. It shook it just enough so that things began to change.

### **Chaos Theory and Muslim Women's Religious Leadership**

Chaos theory, or complexity theory, when applied to social problems was first and foremost a combining of viewpoints about science with human systems. This was typical in social science, and important to recognize, since many social scientists were not natural scientists and might not know that there were often scientific underpinnings in social theory. In the case of

chaos theory, it wiped away the positivist view of life and said that even the very cells we were made of were not linear and predictable, but rather a conglomerate of ever-changing things. We saw how autopoiesis and dissipative structures came together to cause a combination of cornstarch and water to change when energy was added to the mix, and likewise we understood that the lives of Muslim women religious leaders were affected by an occurrence – a disturbance. Like the shaking of the cornstarch and water, Muslim women interacted with the circumstances of the twentieth century, and especially the internet, by self-generating more leadership and bringing forth the original form of women's lives from the time of foundational generations. Like the cornstarch returned to a pattern of solids - in fact the more energy that was added to the cornstarch the more it acted like a solid - Muslim women self-generated their origin story the more the internet (or energy) became part and parcel of Muslim lives. The result was leadership that manifested itself in unique ways.

### Teaching from the Tent

Capra (2002) described living systems as having an open structure; built of form, matter, and process. The material structure was a dissipative structure, as opposed to the comfortable non-changing structures science once thought they were. In order to extrapolate this to social and human systems, Capra (2002) added a fourth perspective; reflective consciousness as it was related to language and context or meaning. Reflective consciousness was similar to pronesis but rooted in biology instead of philosophy. He defined it as a cognitive skill that can both have knowledge of a thing and hold and reflect on values and beliefs and other ethical aspects of thought (Capra, 2002). It was an evolutionary stage and included language and social relationships and culture. His model of the social domain of life was represented in a tetrahedron as seen in Figure 17.

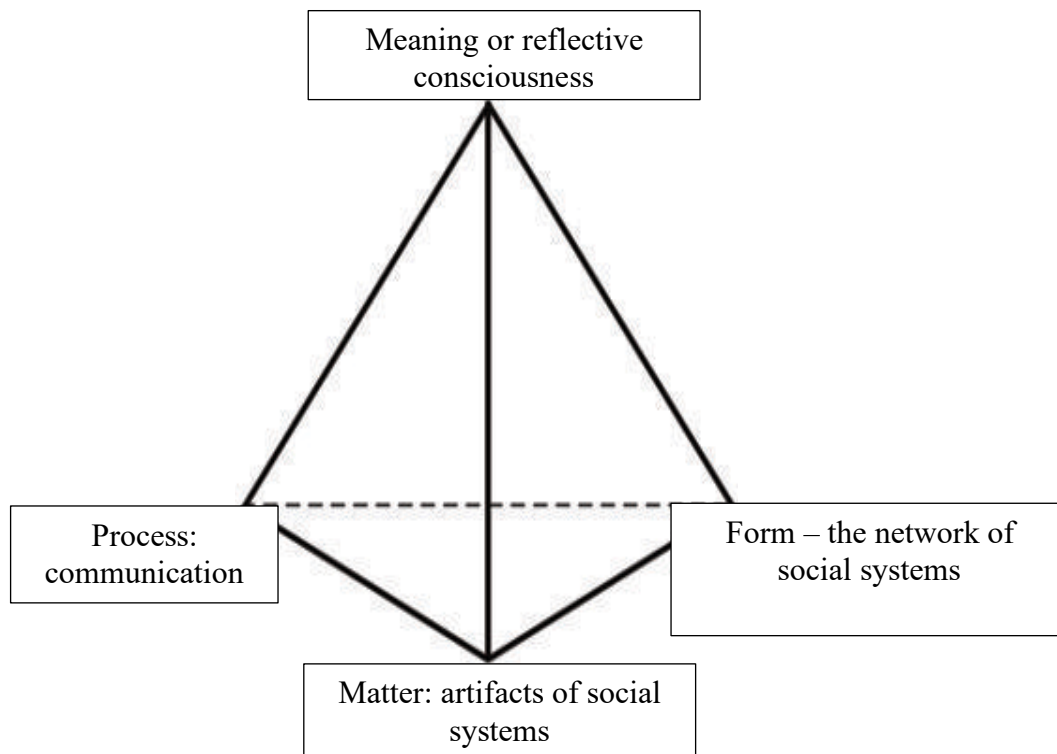
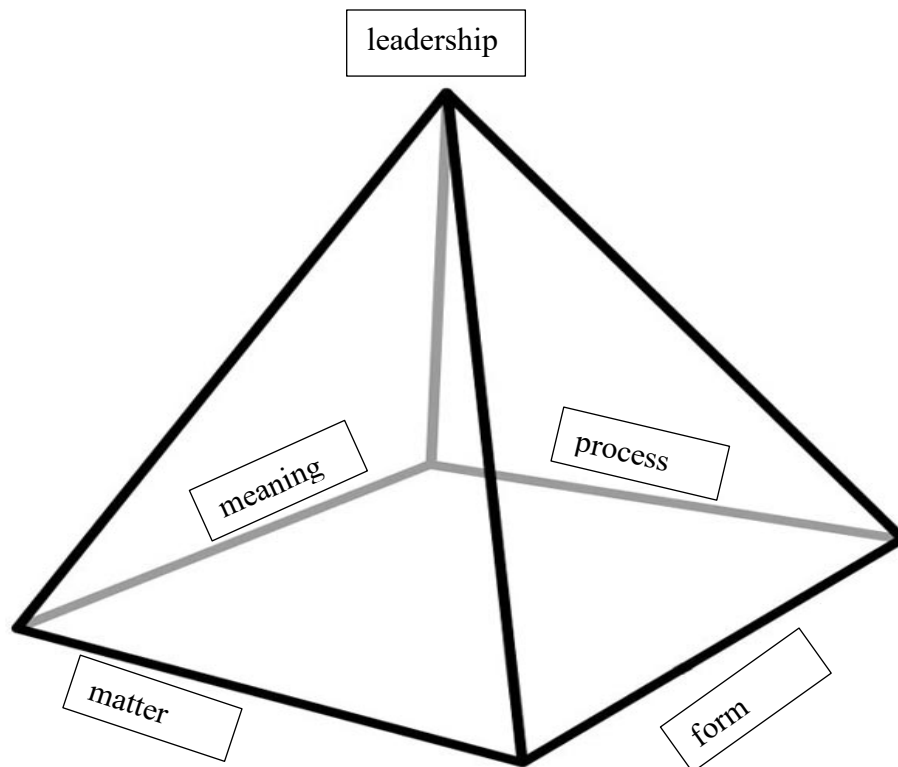


Figure 17. Capra's (2002) model of social systems

Capra's model described the elements of a social system based in the science of chaos theory. Leadership is a social phenomenon and can be seen in almost every social system (families, villages, work-places, and schools etc.), and his model was helpful in understanding the various elements of leadership. It was not, however, sufficient. In order to fully encompass the essence of Muslim women's leadership, Capra's (2002) model needed some adjustment. As seen in Figure 19, I pushed out one of the sides of the triangular base, added a side and a foundation, and then pulled the whole thing up into a three-dimensional square pyramid that looked like a tent. In this shape I added a foundation that was particular to the Muslim women



*Figure 18. Model of Muslim women's religious leadership*

teacher-leaders and built walls of the four aspects of a social system that Capra (2002) spoke of: matter, meaning, process, and form. In extending the walls up to create a tent-like structure I represented the unique leadership phenomenon of Muslim women.

### **The Model**

Let us take a closer look at the new model. The foundation of the square pyramid, or tent of leadership, is a firm foundation of epistemé in Islamic learning. It is what differentiates these traditional leaders from other Muslim women interested in cultural change. Each side of the tent consists of one of the four

elements of social systems in Capra's (2002) theory: matter, process, form and meaning.

The tent forms a model of leadership when the sides are brought together by the individual teacher's creative self. The elements of Muslim women's teacher-leaders' leadership manifested

themselves in the following ways.

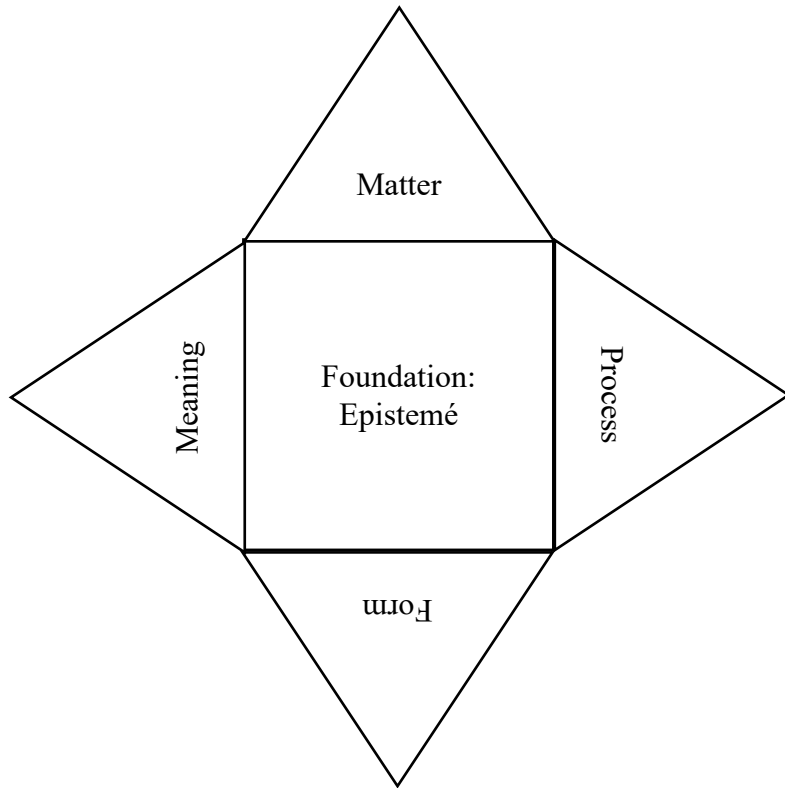


Figure 19. The foundation of the model of Muslim women's religious leadership is epistemé.

**Matter.** Matter referred to the artifacts of leadership. In this case dress, titles, and ritual were all part of the *matter* of leadership. Here a Muslim woman considered her audience as she made decisions about dress, chose a title, and considered which rituals she would participate in. Women on the WRLN thread confirmed concerns about ritual, title and dress and they also mentioned mentorship, mosque

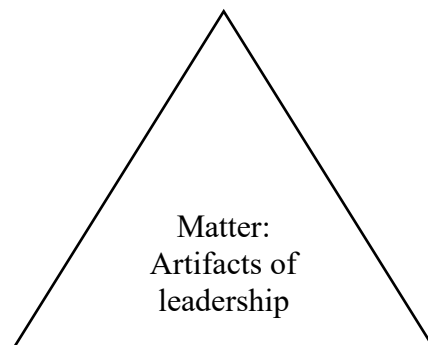


Figure 20. One element of the model is matter, or the artifacts of leadership.



space, and educational curricula in ways that placed these items firmly in the category of matter, or artifacts of leadership.

Publications, and especially books, were also part of the matter of leadership. They could change a person's position within their social system. Degrees were part of the matter of leadership as well. Sometimes classical or traditional learning could stand in for a degree, but having an academic degree was an important part of gaining clout in the social system of leadership. These degrees were different than the actual epistémé that was the foundation of the model. As artifacts of leadership they were part and parcel of the stuff of image and representation.

All of this *matter* of leadership was an important part of leading. The seven participants were conscious and conscientious about the dress, titles and rituals they chose to make a part of their leadership. They were clear about their educational backgrounds – demonstrating the matter (artifacts) of education sometimes more often than the actual ‘stuff’ of it. In the tent model one entire side of leadership is built with these artifacts, or matter, or leadership.

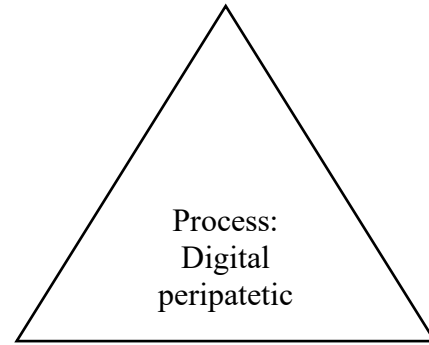
**Process.** Process was defined as communication in social systems, and in this model the communication of Muslim women teacher-leaders could be seen in their online interactions. They were in fact digital peripatetics.

A peripatetic is someone who travels from place to place or works in various places. Aristotelian thinking was called peripatetic thinking because of Aristotle's habit of pacing back and forth while teaching.

At this stage of development Muslim women were digital peripatetics because (a) they wandered from one digital site to another and in general did not ‘stake a claim’ anywhere. It was true that Jamillah Karim, Zaynab Alwani and Kaltun Karani had their own website and/or blog,

but only Jamillah Karim's was updated, and even then, it had not been updated for months at the point of this research.

The term digital peripatetic applied also because, (b) the women in this study 'set up camp' on social media sites, posting once in a while, or letting someone else post for them. They allowed their videos to be used



*Figure 21. The process of Muslim women's leadership is found in the character of their online communication, termed here digital peripatetic.*

by other organizations for their purposes and did not 'organize' their own personal message. In this way they were wandering to and fro – speaking (as Aristotle would speak while pacing) but not anchoring their words at one (or more) platform. Shehnaz Karim did have most of her videos posted to various channels owned by her organization, but these were chosen and posted by the media person in her organization. She was not controlling the message.

And (c) they were digital refugees more often than not. A digital refugee was defined as a person who was not familiar with and/or resistant to digital tools (Coates, 2013). These women had something of the digital refugee problem. Shehnaz spoke at length of her discomfort with an online presence, Ieasha Prime said that she "wasn't good at social media," and only Kaltun expressed an interest in using digital tools with intention. Half of the women on the WRLN thread had either negative or mixed feelings about internet opportunities, and those who had positive feelings only referenced the opportunity to reach wider audiences.

I termed them digital peripatetics instead of digital refugees because part of the process of leadership was the need to be able to wander to and fro from one site to another without too much commitment. I also recognized that in the resistance to online environments there could be a throwback to the tradition of privacy that Muslim women come from. One of the women on

the thread said that Muslim women are used to privacy, so they don't like to open their lives and live online. Another was concerned with the possibility of too much ego and the celebrity leadership problem. Another worried that online environments made followers feel entitled to criticize scholars who spent their entire lives learning and leading. So the choice of digital peripatetics was different than being thrust into digital refugee status because of circumstances. The digital peripatetic lifestyle was chosen by women who do not fully trust the platforms of social media or the purpose of websites and other places of online communication. It was not a weakness, rather, a choice.

Another reason for the term digital peripatetic, (d) was that these women began wandering the globe the moment their videos or blogs were uploaded to the net. Ieasha Prime very succinctly commented on the online relationship. She said, "We are invited into people's homes without ever inviting them into our homes." In essence women leaders who used online platforms were wandering from house to house, city to city and country to country without ever physically leaving their living room. This was perhaps the most important reason for the term.

Finally, (e) they were also teaching as Aristotle did, but digitally. He would pace back and forth while teaching and since another word for Aristotelian thinking is peripatetic thinking, the term was especially fitting. The Muslim women leaders were walking between digital sites and teaching. They were peripatetic teachers.

*Table 6.*

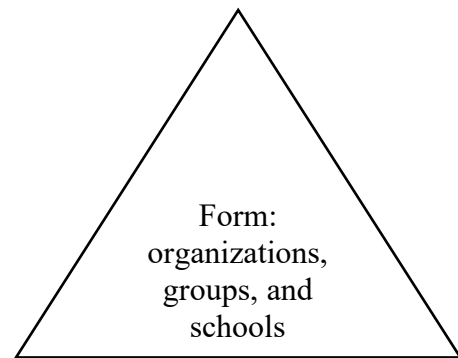
Five reasons one might be a digital peripatetic

#	Digital Peripatetics
1	Move from one digital site to another
2	Allow other sites to use their online material (articles, videos, etc.)

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 3 | Originate as a digital refugee                           |
| 4 | Have a global reach, or the potential for a global reach |
| 5 | Teach at various sites                                   |
- 

**Form.** In Capra's model, form stood for the network of social systems. In my model form is the network that the leaders used to manifest their leadership. These networks were found in the organizations they started, worked for, and/or ran, schools they taught at, opened, or consulted for, sisterhoods they built in their local communities and online through WhatsApp threads and other platforms of togetherness, connections they made at conferences and events that they attended.

Kaltun Karani began her own teaching institute for teen girls. Ieasha Prime began two education focused nonprofit organizations and Shehnaz Karim was the executive director of the organization she started with her husband. Zainab Alwani began her own nonprofit organization for orphans, volunteered for the Islamic seminary foundation as editor of their journal, and worked as a full-time professor at a local university. Zaynab Ansari worked as the first female resident scholar while teaching at a local Islamic seminar. Jamillah Karim identified with the Nation of Islam community and she had recently joined a Sufi tariqa. And Halima Krausen had been imam of the Hamburg mosque, and was now a sheikha of her Chisti tariqa. All of these networks became the form of their leadership.

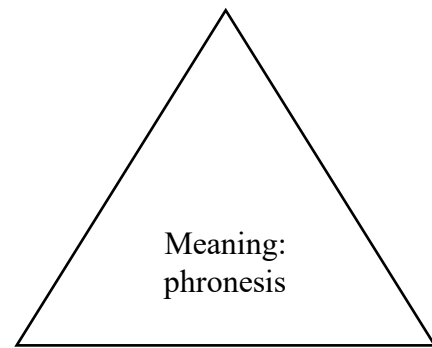


*Figure 22. The form of leadership manifested in organizations, schools, and groups the leaders either founded or were directly connected to.*

On the WRLN thread women spoke of schools they worked for, organizations they were planning to start or had started, and of course the thread itself was one of the forms of leadership they interacted with.

**Meaning.** Meaning was found in culture and the culture of women's leadership was found in their expert use of phronesis. For Aristotle phronesis was the combination of intellectual and moral virtues. Great intellect combined epistemé, Sophia, and nous – a combination of these three offered those who possessed them the ability to understand effective ways of being, or in this case, of leading. The second part of phronesis was the actual acting in goodness. We can translate phronesis into the Muslim term *ihsan* which was commonly understood to mean acting with excellence based on religious knowledge and understanding.

The choice not to use the word feminism when describing the feminist work that they do was a phronetic choice. It reflected their deep understanding of feminism itself, and how western feminism had either left them out or demanded they fulfill a western view of what women want. It also reflected an understanding of the community of the faithful that they were leading. They chose to act in a feminist way, writing books about domestic violence, discussing not only the role of women in society but the actual essence of womanhood as presented in the Quran, pushing for more women scholars and helping to develop them, and marching at the Women's march and other things easily defined as feminist work, without taking on the label of feminism. This gave them legitimacy and voice in their communities and opened



*Figure 23. Meaning or the culture of leadership was seen in phronesis, or intellect and virtue working together to create excellence of behavior and character.*

more doors for action. Phronesis was about the ability to act – and these women were doing the work of leadership.

The women built cultures based on this phronesis. The culture of leadership, their phronesis, was often demonstrated in how they treated me, a researcher. Ieasha Prime, after a horrific day of travel and facing a 3:00 am departure, sat patiently answering my questions for hours after which, before departing she asked, “Have I fulfilled your rights? Have I given you everything you need?” Jamillah Karim sent me unsolicited and regular updates on her leadership life. Zainab Alwani responded immediately to any question I asked, Zaynab Ansari contacted me immediately after her trip to Mecca to see if I needed anything – she wanted to be sure her absence had not been a hardship for my work. Halima Krausen was in between appointments and in the middle of preparing an important lecture when our interview began, but she was smiling and helpful and never made me feel like she was rushed. Kaltun Karani and Shehnaz Karim both spent extra time with me answering my questions and were open to any and all additional contact. They were all extremely busy, but they poured help and virtue into this project that was not theirs.

I saw similar behavior in their interactions with others. The meaning of their leadership was soaked in *ihsan* – or excellence of behavior and character. It was a phronesis that Aristotle and al-Farābi would have been proud of.

### **Leadership**

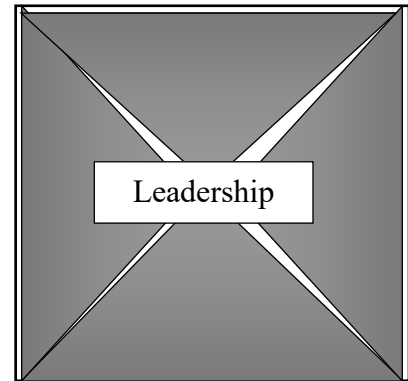
In order for leadership to be formed at the vertex of this tent, the four elements of a social system must be pulled together by the leader. She was herself the tie that bound the walls of the tent together. Her personality, patience, intelligence, and flexibility wove between the walls of

the tent to create this new thing, a shelter for her. We see the personality of each leader here in the manifestation of matter, process, form, and meaning.

Much leadership literature discussed the relationship of a leader's personality to her effectiveness as a leader. In work place situations people used tools like Situational Judgement tests to look for leadership traits or potential leaders (Oostrom, Born, Serli, and Van der Molen, 2012.). Others administered the MBTI (Meyers Brigs Temperment Inventory) to look for the personalities of team leaders and their followers, (Keirse, 1998) and still others relied on the Strengthsfinder 2.0 (Rath & Conche, 2008) to understand leadership potential and personality. There was not much correlation between education and the personality of leadership, but a 2018 study did find a significant connection between religiosity, ethical leadership and personality traits (Mostaza, Narbarte, Gayoba, Borrromeo, & Balila, 2018). They found that religiosity, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and extraversion predicted ethical leadership (Mostaza, Narbarte, Gayoba, Borrromeo, & Balila, 2018).

The women in this study were agreeable, open to new experiences, and conscientious. They were a mix of extraverted and introverted personalities, but even the introverts were willing to spend long periods of time with the people they served.

Further research into the specificities of each woman's personality would be a benefit to this model. However, the personality of the leader only shaped the tent of leadership, it did not determine whether or not it existed. This was in the foundation of epistemé and the matter, form, process and meaning of their leadership.



*Figure 24. The top of the model comes together and forms the individual Muslim woman's leadership style.*

The tent was a flexible structure - it moved when she moved - but it was also a shelter that allowed her to both protect her own spiritual state and to build community amongst the people that she met. The essence of each woman's leadership could be seen in her individual tent.

### **Summary of the Model**

The essence of Muslim women's leadership can be seen in the shape of the square pyramid, or tent. The foundation of the shape is epistemé, or Islamic knowledge. This was the beginning of leadership and in Muslim communities, very important. Degrees and a *sanad* of learning gave women legitimacy and clout. It allowed them to work in the field and put up the walls of their tent of leadership. The sides of the tent were based in the four elements of a social system as postulated by Fritjof Capra (2002) and made more specific for the phenomenon of Muslim women's leadership. Matter, or the artifacts of leadership, included dress, titles, and other symbolic and/or practical pieces of how the women presented themselves to the world. Process was the communication of leadership. Muslim women used the internet to communicate their leadership, but not in typical ways. Hence, I called them digital peripatetics, a reference to Aristotle and the wandering nature of their online work. Form was seen in the schools, organizations, and networks they created and/or worked for. Meaning was manifested in the combination of intellectual and moral virtue described in phronesis. They had practical wisdom and *ihsan*. Finally, the sides of the square pyramid were gathered together to form a tent of leadership. Each woman had her own tent, giving her individuality and autonomy, but the tents could be gathered together to create community and strengthen one another.



This model of leadership recognized the historical claim to religious leadership that Muslim women had. Fourteen centuries of Muslim women's influence were not lost in the chaos of the twentieth century, but rather brought back by the catalyst of the internet.

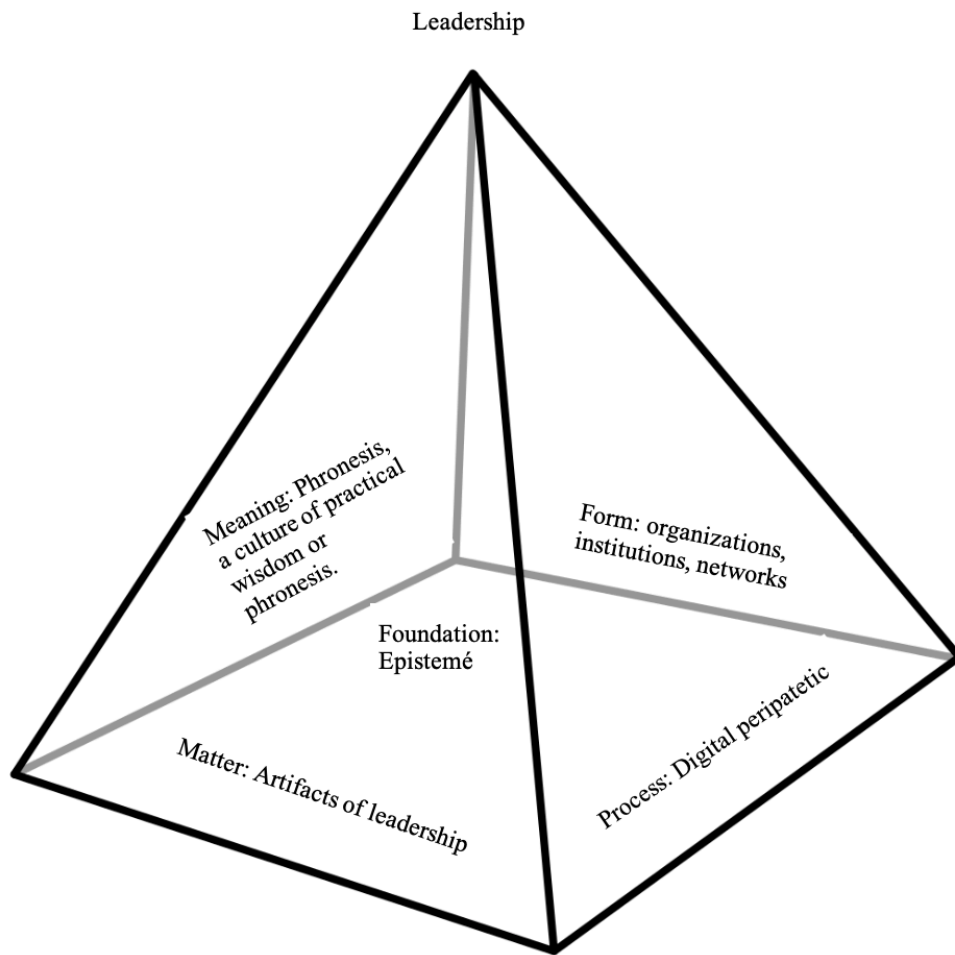


Figure 25. Model of Muslim women's religious leadership

### **Conclusions and Further Discussion**

I began this journey asking the following questions: What were the lived realities of Muslim women teacher-leaders? What was the interplay of digital culture in their leadership? What was the essence of their leadership?

I met seven women who let me into their lives so that I could investigate their leadership and taught me how to be a better leader. I was also introduced to 75 Muslim women religious leaders via WhatsApp, who helped me answer my questions by virtue of their conversations. I learned that online religion and religion online were now called digital religion and that it permeated the religious lives of all of us, whether we were online or not.

Feminism, peripatetic thinking, and chaos theory furthered my understanding of the data and helped me build a model of Muslim women's religious leadership. The model, in the shape of a tent (or square pyramid) consisted of a foundation of Islamic knowing, or epistemé, and sides of matter, process, form and meaning, all woven together with the personalities and emotions of each individual woman. Matter was the stuff of leadership that helped her perform in her role: dress, title and ritual along with publications and speaking events. The process of leadership was rooted in their digital habits of communication, which I described as digital peripatetic because they wander to and fro between platforms and sites while teaching. Form showed itself in the organizations, schools, sisterhoods, and communities that the women created and maintained within their leadership realm. And meaning was found in the culture of leadership which originated in ihsan or the phronesis of knowledge. They brought together intellectual and moral virtue in their leadership.

The shape of a tent also implied flexibility and immediacy, as in they could erect their tent of leadership anywhere it may be needed and open the flaps, giving shelter to the people they meet and affect along the way.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The literature demonstrated that women in the Abrahamic faiths had never fully been out of leadership, though congregations and followers expected the labeled leader to be male. Amongst Muslim women we found a long history of individual women leaders and a wide geographic tradition of women's leadership groups. We recognized the last century of colonialism and postulated about its effect on Muslim women's leadership.

We noted that Muslim women had been part of digital religion since the first available applications - email and newsrooms - and that digital religion was pervasive in all communities of faith. The data demonstrated a number of themes and we discussed topics around becoming a leader, leading, feminism and misogyny, online platforms, and loneliness. The data helped me understand the essence of their leadership, and I constructed a model based in the theories of Fritjof Capra (2002) but changed and developed to represent Muslim women's leadership.

### **Limitations**

This study looked at the essence of Muslim women's religious leadership from the perspective of teacher-leaders and did not begin to understand the perspectives of students and followers. Nor were we able to measure the impact of the leadership in any way other than to note numbers of posts and interactions with online followers. Leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers, so this was certainly a limitation, however, I set out to study the perspective of the women themselves and I have done so.

The WhatsApp group helped to widen the base of women, and though I did not do an in-depth study of their leadership lives, their conversations confirmed the themes and attitudes that had shown themselves in the deep dive into the lives of the seven teacher-leaders. Certainly, it was a limitation, however, that I was not able to interview and follow the publications, online presences, and teaching styles of the 75 women in the thread, and the dozens of others who were elsewhere in the world.

### **Implication of the Results for Practice**

In the practice of leadership and the understanding of leadership and digital religion, the implications of my study on practice are vast. The model speaks to young women who would like to become Muslim teacher-leaders, and it also lends itself to women of other faiths. The literature told us that congregations expect to see men at the pulpit; this model helps women gather the parts of their leadership tent in order to prepare for space at the microphone. In the world of digital religion, the pulpit can now be found on online platforms, so instead of wasting time fighting for a khutba or sermon in a building, women can use that energy to perfect their online presence, change the image of what a religious leader looks like, and circle back and take the pulpit without pomp or circumstance.

The research also pointed to a need for a community of practice. The tents need to be pitched near each other. Women in my study spoke of aloneness in their leadership - some sought mentorship, and others were thirsty for other women to share with who were not students, but colleagues. In order to create a community of practice, threads like the WRLN thread were critical to creating community. There were other ways to create a community of practice, perhaps through an online Facebook style app created for Muslim women. Of course, available

apps can be used for this as well, but in order to become a community of practice rather than just a social spot, it should work toward the creation of knowledge.

Knowledge production was an important part of the form of leadership. When teacher-leaders published their words become part of a larger conversation. For teacher-leaders to increase the number of voices that were part of the production of knowledge I suggest (a) a website hub that would be a place for women writers writing about issues important to Muslim women teacher-leaders. I also recommend (b) a large conference of women teacher-leaders, with paper submissions, and a final publication. And since one kind of publishing was the online publication of video, posts, articles, blogs, etc., I also recommend (c) the training of women teacher-leaders in online skills. As Muslim women must have a foundation of Islamic knowledge, Quran memorization, and spiritual mentorship, they now need a digital skill set. We should include these skills in teaching programs and make them part and parcel of a solid education in leadership.

### **Is this another type of feminism?**

I had hoped to tease out a new type of feminism from the words and actions of the women I studied. Instead I learned that the label was not welcome or helpful. I postulated that this could be because of their phronesis, the fractal of their existence (early Islamic thought and experience showing itself in a new way), and/or perhaps it was feminism itself that held up a stop sign to Muslim women's theoretical needs.

I found that they were doing feminist work but did not want the label. In fact, it was my label on their work, not theirs. For the teacher-leaders, they were doing Islamic work, the work of their foremothers and forefathers, the work they felt called to do. It was this foundation – a deep connection to their religion and community – that spurred them forward.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

More work needs to be done in a number of areas. We need research into the curriculum that prepares women teacher-leaders to discover if it is on par with that of men, and to ensure it is free of sexism. Research into Muslim men's leadership in digital religion is now necessary, and a case study that watches one leader grow from a local halaqa leader/ preacher to a global leader would be important as well. It would be beneficial as well to do a comparative study between men and women teacher-leaders to attempt to identify challenges and privileges unique to gender. Further study into leadership in digital religion across theological lines is also important, both of male and female leaders. A study into the effects of digital religious leadership on followers would also be an important contribution to the world of religious leadership.

### **Reflections and Conclusion**

I have been humbled, excited, proud, and hopeful during this process. I discovered that I had internalized some negative stereotypes of Muslim women religious leaders. I had an expectation of limited access, frustration, and other negative possibilities. Instead, I found empowered women who were living their life's work. My research helped me to rethink my own work. I became very focused on my own nonprofit organization and the good work that I hope we will be able to do. I further hope to create a community of practice in cooperation with the women I studied, the women on the thread, and all of the women I took note of along the way. I want to lay my own foundation of episteme, build my own walls of matter, process, and meaning, and tie together my own tent of leadership. Then, I hope to encourage us all to pitch our full-sized tents in the vicinity of one another and work together in the great phronetic (and feminist) work of religious leadership.

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APPENDIX A

For purposes of transliteration I have followed the IJMES system for all words that do not normally appear in a common dictionary and names that do not commonly appear in media or literature.

International Journal of Middle East Studies Transliteration System

IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH														
CONSONANTS														
A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish														
	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k or g	k or ñ	k or n
ب	b	b	b	b or p	ژ	—	zh	j	j	ج			or y	or y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s	چ			or ğ	or ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	ṯ	ṯ	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ş	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ẓ	ẓ	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h <sup>1</sup>	h <sup>1</sup>
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v or u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g or ğ	g or ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	ẓ	ẓ	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a <sup>2</sup>			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	q	k	ال	a <sup>3</sup>			

<sup>1</sup> When h is not final. <sup>2</sup> In construct state: at. <sup>3</sup> For the article, al- and -l-.

VOWELS			
ARABIC AND PERSIAN		OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH	
Long	ا or آ ā	ā	} words of Arabic and Persian origin only
	و ū	ū	
	ي ī	ī	
Doubled	ئى iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	
	ئو uww (final form ū)	uvv	
Diphthongs	او au or aw	ev	
	اي ai or ay	ey	
Short	ا a	a or e	
	و u	u or ü / o or ö	
	ي i	i or i	

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

## APPENDIX B

## Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your biography:
  - a. Childhood story
  - b. Parents relationship
  - c. Education
  - d. Patrons/helpers
  - e. Road to leadership –
  - f. Personality? MBTI?
2. What do you view as tawfiq in your life?
3. What would you describe as ‘the community that you lead?’
4. What is your vision or what are your goals as a leader?
5. Could you describe in your own words your leadership role in your community?
6. Walk me through your path to this place. When did you decide to become a scholar-leader, how did you prepare yourself for this role. What challenges did you face preparing yourself for the role of leader?
7. Can you describe what you are trying to do (vision/goals) with your school/org? Why you started it, etc..
8. What challenges have you faced in your work?
9. Authors: Why did you choose to write about (topic) in your (book/dissertation)? What was your personal motivation? What have you learned since? Are you working on a book /writing project now? What is the topic area?
10. How did writing a book/dissertation change you/contribute to your leadership?
11. What else can you tell me about the life of a Muslim woman scholar-activist-educator?
  - a. Who have your patrons and mentors been? Who has inspired you?
  - b. Have you had critics? What was that like? How did you manage?
12. How do you define legitimacy, and do you struggle with your own imposter syndrome?
13. What about family? Is it hard on them? How do you keep work separate? How do you manage home life? (This is a bit cliché I know, but .. )
14. What do you do for self-care? Can you speak to your worship life?

15. How do you feel about the word ‘feminism’?
16. Are you acting in a feminist way?
17. How would you characterize your influence?
18. What rituals do you lead? Where do you lead them?
19. What difficulties have you faced in this path? Do you think anything has been easier because you are a woman?
20. How do you view the role of social media for you as a leader? How do you try to use it?
21. How much do you edit yourself for digital media representations?
22. How important is your online presence/community to your work/leadership?
23. What is your emotional investment in your work?
24. How do you think the internet is affecting Muslim religious authority?
25. How do you weave social media into your leadership?
26. Are you able to be yourself on social media platforms? In the position of leadership?
27. How would you describe “leadership” – is that different for Muslim leadership? What about Muslim women’s leadership?
28. How would you like to be known?
29. How would you characterize yourself? (Madhhab – aqida/fiqh etc)
30. Can you speak to Islam and liberalism? Modernism? Misogyny? Freedom?
31. Tell me about your style hijab/niqab – is it thought out in relationship to your leadership? Why have you chosen the style of hijab that you have chosen? Do you feel this gives you more authority in the Muslim community? Do you feel it is a hindrance in any way?
32. What about your title? Did you choose it? Do you insist on it?
33. What languages do you speak?
34. What about the rest of how you dress? How does a Muslim woman leader dress?

35. Do you have an image you are trying to promote? (an image of Muslim women?)
36. What about issues of ethnicity/race/ displacement and immigration – how do you think these affect you and/or your decision to lead? Or ability to do so?
37. Who do you consider your community (is it different than the community you lead?)?
38. What are the most important personal qualities that you have that helped you get to where you are today?
39. What are some of the things that have held you up?
40. Who have been your most important mentors and supporters and why?
41. What do you think is the greatest challenge facing Muslim communities today?
42. Talk to me about loneliness
43. What do you see as a future for Muslim women religious leaders? How do you see yourself in that future?
44. Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX C

## PUBLIC TEACHING RUBRIC

Standard I: Teacher is prepared	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Documented
a. Lecture has a beg, mid and end					
b. Lecture relies on sacred text					
c. Teacher has notes or an outline (at least seems to in her head)					
Standard II: Teacher is personable	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Documented
d. Uses personal stories to highlight a point					
e. Uses accessible language					
f. Uses visuals, analogies, and examples to illustrate point					
g. Repeats points in new ways					
h. Teacher uses facial expression,					
Standard III: Teacher knows the content she is teaching	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Documented
i. Knows appropriate content to the teaching area					
j. Recognizes the interconnectedness of content and disciplines					
k. Makes instruction relevant to listeners					
l. Shows enthusiasm about her subject matter					
Standard IV: Teacher is engaging	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Documented
m. Uses her voice to engage students/ audience (volume, and tone)					
n. Asks questions that develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills					
o. Has a sense of humor					



- p. Uses narrative tools to make the instructional point

## APPENDIX D

## Websites that Feature the Seven Teacher-Leaders

Name	Name of org	Capacity listed	link
Zaynab Ansari	Tayseer Academy	Resident scholar	<a href="http://tayseerseminary.org/ustadha-zaynab-ansari/">http://tayseerseminary.org/ustadha-zaynab-ansari/</a>
	Seekers Hub	Scholar	<a href="http://seekershubs.org/home/teachers/zaynab-ansari">http://seekershubs.org/home/teachers/zaynab-ansari</a>
	Al Madina Institute	Scholar and teacher	<a href="https://almadinainstitute.org/teachers/zaynab-ansari/">https://almadinainstitute.org/teachers/zaynab-ansari/</a>
	Ribaat Academic Institute – a project of Rabata	Teacher	<a href="https://ribaata.rabata.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1583">https://ribaata.rabata.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1583</a>
Zainab Alwani	Personal	self	<a href="http://www.zainabalwani.com/">http://www.zainabalwani.com/</a>
	Al Madina Institute	Scholar and teacher	<a href="https://almadinainstitute.org/teachers/zainab-alwani/">https://almadinainstitute.org/teachers/zainab-alwani/</a>
	American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM)	Guest scholar	<a href="https://www.alimprogram.org/scholars/dr-zainab/">https://www.alimprogram.org/scholars/dr-zainab/</a>
	Karamah	Board of directors	<a href="http://karamah.org/director/dr-zainab-alwani-7">http://karamah.org/director/dr-zainab-alwani-7</a>
	The Islamic Seminary of America	Faculty	<a href="http://www.islamicseminary.us/faculty/">http://www.islamicseminary.us/faculty/</a>
	Berkeley University	Co-sponsor of event	<a href="https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/zainab-alwani">https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/zainab-alwani</a>
	Inter-national Institute of Islamic Thought IIIT	Instructor	<a href="https://iiit.org/en/dr-zainab-alwani/">https://iiit.org/en/dr-zainab-alwani/</a>
	The Fiqh Council of North America	Vice Chairman	<a href="http://fiqh-council.org/about-fcna/">http://fiqh-council.org/about-fcna/</a>
	Fawakih	Instructor	<a href="http://www.fawakih.com/index.php/about-fawakih/instructors/181-zainab-alwani">http://www.fawakih.com/index.php/about-fawakih/instructors/181-zainab-alwani</a>
	Rate my Profs	Professor	<a href="http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=843345">http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=843345</a>

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	Fairfax Institute	Faculty	<a href="https://www.thefairfaxinstitute.org/dr-zainab-alwani.html">https://www.thefairfaxinstitute.org/dr-zainab-alwani.html</a>
	Howard University	Faculty	<a href="http://divinity.howard.edu/faculty.html">http://divinity.howard.edu/faculty.html</a>
	Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice	Editor in Chief	<a href="https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/JIFP/index">https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/JIFP/index</a>
	The Orphan Care Project	Founder	<a href="https://www.orphancareproject.com/">https://www.orphancareproject.com/</a>
Jamillah Karim	Huffington Post	contributor	<a href="https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/jamillah-karim">https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/jamillah-karim</a>
	Race-Gender-Faith Blog	Personal blog	<a href="http://race-gender-faith.blogspot.com/">http://race-gender-faith.blogspot.com/</a>
	Islamic Society of North America	speaker	<a href="http://www.isna.net/jamillah-karim/">http://www.isna.net/jamillah-karim/</a>
	Women's media center	Expert	<a href="https://www.womensmediacenter.com/shesource/expert/jamillah-karim">https://www.womensmediacenter.com/shesource/expert/jamillah-karim</a>
	Georgetown University, Berkley Center for Religious, peace and world affairs	Speaker	<a href="https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/jamillah-karim">https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/jamillah-karim</a>
Shehnaz Karim	The Rhoda Institute	Teacher	<a href="http://rhodainstitute.org/teachers/">http://rhodainstitute.org/teachers/</a>
	Rabata	Teacher	<a href="https://riabaat.rabata.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1583">https://riabaat.rabata.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1583</a>
	Muslim Link Canada Network	Scholar/Teacher	<a href="https://muslimlink.ca/directory/vancouver/muslim-services/teachers-scholars/5028-shenaz-karim?city=vancouver">https://muslimlink.ca/directory/vancouver/muslim-services/teachers-scholars/5028-shenaz-karim?city=vancouver</a>
	Rate my teacher for BC Muslim school	Teacher	<a href="https://ca.ratemyteachers.com/shehnaz-karim/662825-t">https://ca.ratemyteachers.com/shehnaz-karim/662825-t</a>
	Service Canada	Program officer	<a href="http://www.goc411.ca/en/130684/Shehnaz-Karim">http://www.goc411.ca/en/130684/Shehnaz-Karim</a>
	Holistic Journeys	Guest	<a href="http://holisticjourneys.net/healing-the-mind-22-ustadha-shehnaz-karim-lotus-blossom-retreat/">http://holisticjourneys.net/healing-the-mind-22-ustadha-shehnaz-karim-lotus-blossom-retreat/</a>
	Seekers Hub	Teacher	<a href="https://www.meetup.com/T-I-K-S-The-Islamic-Knowledge-Seekers/events/228368836/">https://www.meetup.com/T-I-K-S-The-Islamic-Knowledge-Seekers/events/228368836/</a>

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	Risala Rifqa retreat	Teacher	<a href="http://www.risalah.ca/rifqa2018.html">http://www.risalah.ca/rifqa2018.html</a>
	Lotus retreat	Teacher	<a href="https://lotusblossomretreat.org/adults/">https://lotusblossomretreat.org/adults/</a>
	World Parliament of Religions	Teacher	<a href="https://event.crowdcompass.com/2018parliament/multi-level-list/ScheduleBySpeaker/2?person_oid=UuvwkQPy8r&amp;title=Shehnaz%2520Karim">https://event.crowdcompass.com/2018parliament/multi-level-list/ScheduleBySpeaker/2?person_oid=UuvwkQPy8r&amp;title=Shehnaz%2520Karim</a>
	The Salafi Feminist Blog	Female Scholar	<a href="http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.com/2016/10/female-scholars-and-students-of.html">http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.com/2016/10/female-scholars-and-students-of.html</a>
Halima Krausen	Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE)	Female Scholar	<a href="http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslim-woman/halima-krausen-7/">http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslim-woman/halima-krausen-7/</a>
	Wikipedia (in German)	Public figure	<a href="https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halima_Krausen">https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halima_Krausen</a>
	Muslimah Speaks	Category	<a href="http://muslimahspeaks.com/lectures-interviews/halima-krausen/">http://muslimahspeaks.com/lectures-interviews/halima-krausen/</a>
	Intersectional Centre for Inclusion and Social Justice	Instructor	<a href="https://incise.center/tag/halima-krausen/">https://incise.center/tag/halima-krausen/</a>
	Limmud Conference 2016	Presenter	<a href="https://events.limmud.org/limmud-conference-2016/programme/presenters/K/">https://events.limmud.org/limmud-conference-2016/programme/presenters/K/</a>
	Modern Church Faith in the world	Presenter	<a href="https://modernchurch.org.uk/mc-events/annual-conference/past-conferences/2012">https://modernchurch.org.uk/mc-events/annual-conference/past-conferences/2012</a>
	University of Hamburg	Instructor	<a href="https://www.stine.uni-hamburg.de/scripts/mgrqispi.dll?APPNAME=CampusNet&amp;PRGNAME=COURSEDETAILS&amp;ARGUMENTS=-N0000000000000002,-N000574,-N0,-N366614531268361,-N366614531244362,-N0,-N0,-N0">https://www.stine.uni-hamburg.de/scripts/mgrqispi.dll?APPNAME=CampusNet&amp;PRGNAME=COURSEDETAILS&amp;ARGUMENTS=-N0000000000000002,-N000574,-N0,-N366614531268361,-N366614531244362,-N0,-N0,-N0</a>
Ieasha Prime	Personal	Bio	<a href="http://www.ieashaprime.com/about-her.html">http://www.ieashaprime.com/about-her.html</a>
	Islamic Society of North America	Speaker	<a href="http://www.isna.net/ieasha-prime/">http://www.isna.net/ieasha-prime/</a>
	Barakah Inc	Co Founder and Executive Director	<a href="http://www.barakahinc.com/about.html">http://www.barakahinc.com/about.html</a>

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	Dar al-hijrah Islamic center Muslim Wellness foundation	Women's program director Speaker	<a href="https://hijrah.org/leadership/#1504550981506-d032081b-8424">https://hijrah.org/leadership/#1504550981506-d032081b-8424</a>
	International women and Justice Summit Hijab Fest Islamic Circle of North America Inner-City Muslim Aciton Network America's Islamic heritage museum and cultural center Ribaat Academic Program: Rabata inc Institute for Social Policy and Understanding Islamic World International conference	Speaker Speaker Speaker Speaker Scholar corner Teacher speaker speaker	<a href="https://www.muslimwellness.com/2017">https://www.muslimwellness.com/2017</a> <a href="https://wajsummit.org/speakers/">https://wajsummit.org/speakers/</a> <a href="http://www.hijabfest.org/the-main-event/">http://www.hijabfest.org/the-main-event/</a> <a href="https://icnaconvention.org/speakers/">https://icnaconvention.org/speakers/</a> <a href="https://www.imacentral.org/2017-iman-artist-retreat/2017-iman-artist-retreat-bios/">https://www.imacentral.org/2017-iman-artist-retreat/2017-iman-artist-retreat-bios/</a> <a href="http://www.aihmuseum.org/scholars--corner.html">http://www.aihmuseum.org/scholars--corner.html</a> <a href="https://ribaat.rabata.org/enrol/index.php?id=275">https://ribaat.rabata.org/enrol/index.php?id=275</a> <a href="https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ISPU-@-MAS-ICNA.pdf">https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ISPU-@-MAS-ICNA.pdf</a> <a href="https://islamicconference.org/">https://islamicconference.org/</a>
Kaltun Karani	Personal website Reviving Sisterhood of Empowerment Hikama academy	bio Speaker teacher	<a href="https://kaltunkarani.com/">https://kaltunkarani.com/</a> <a href="https://www.revivingsisterhood.org/kaltun-karani-1/">https://www.revivingsisterhood.org/kaltun-karani-1/</a> <a href="http://hikmaacademy.com/author/kaltun/">http://hikmaacademy.com/author/kaltun/</a>

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AlMaghreb	Teacher	<a href="http://ilmfest.com/#speakers">http://ilmfest.com/#speakers</a>
LaYinka	coach	<a href="https://www.layinkasanni.com/about/">https://www.layinkasanni.com/about/</a>
Assaani		

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