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Islam as liberatory exploration: praying with British inclusive Muslims

Fahad Rahman[1,2]

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Abstract

This paper explores the process of meaning-making in an Islamic site—The Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI)—where the cultivation of a plural religious space is pursued as an Islamic, rather than a secular, virtue. The study highlights the discourse, spatiality, and praxis of the Friday prayers at IMI, revealing a distinctive non-hierarchical symbolic spatiality, plural congregational practices, shared ritual leadership, and interactive sermons cultivating diversity in congregants' ethical self-formation. Drawing on these ethnographic experiences, the paper advocates for an expansion of Talal Asad's concept of the discursive tradition of Islam by proposing a greater emphasis on 'non-established' practices, such as IMI's gender-expansive Friday prayers. Additionally, by questioning the primacy given to reason and argumentation referring to the foundational Islamic texts in Asad's approach, it highlights how embodied, affective, and phenomenological experiences play a defining role in Islamic discursive traditions. Inclusive Muslims offer an expanded purpose of power within the Islamic discursive tradition, moving away from conceptions of Islamic authority linked with 'orthodoxy' to ones demonstrating, what Shahab Ahmed calls, the 'explorative' mode of authority. Consequently, the study of non-normative, inclusive Muslim communities, exemplified by the IMI, offers insights into alternative Islamic practices and discourses and challenges conventional anthropological definitions of Islam as a discursive tradition.

Keywords Talal Asad · Shahab Ahmed · Islamic discursive tradition · Orthodoxy · Modes of authority · Progressive Muslims

In the heart of rainy London, amid the bustling streets and grey skies of the winter of 2018, a vibrant scene unfolded within the walls of a Unitarian church. A

✉ Fahad Rahman
f.rahman8@lse.ac.uk

[1] London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

[2] School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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dedicated group of Muslims, volunteers for the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI), chatted excitedly as they prepared to transform a bright room into a sacred space for prayers. This afternoon was special as IMI welcomed a group of postgraduate students, along with their professor, enrolled in a course on Islam in Europe at a London university. The group was invited to observe the Friday prayers and engage in post-prayer discussions with its leaders and congregants.

The students were brimming with questions after witnessing the Friday congregational prayers at IMI, which in many ways reflected the practice of Muslims around the world while also departing from them in striking ways: British Sign Language intertwined with the call to prayer as people of all genders stood shoulder to shoulder behind a female imam after she had delivered her sermon (*khutbah*) to the diverse congregation. The diversity of the congregants was visible not only through their race, ethnicity, and skin colour but also, crucially, from the sectarian and religious diversity that was evident in the different ways people were offering their prayers, even while participating in the congregational prayers. The students inquired about the historical, legal, and theological bases for the unconventional beliefs and practices at IMI and seemed to interpret the answers as representing another branch of Islam, albeit a heterodox one. But the concept of sectarian pluralism and inclusivity *within* a mosque proved more challenging, as demonstrated by the following exchange.

A Muslim student wondered if IMI was seeking 'to give the correct way to Islam as opposed to the others [established Islamic schools of law (*maddhab*) and sectarian communities]?' Rabia,[1] the female imam that afternoon, responded, 'We do not aim to preach *the* correct way to be Muslim but to provide an alternative space for a diverse range of ways of being Muslim'. The student responded that such diversity would lead to 'pick and mix Muslims operating on convenience rather than faith… prayers are not valid if others do not follow the same way'. Thereby she was implying that the goal of establishing uniformity, coherence, and orthodoxy was as an essential purpose, and condition, of the Islamic discursive tradition.

This belief is also central to the influential conceptualisation of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' proposed by Talal Asad as a way out of either essentialist or nominalist concepts of Islam. He stated that 'it should be the anthropologist's first task to describe and analyze the kinds of reasoning, and the reasons for arguing, that underlie Islamic traditional practice' (1986, p. 16). This conceptualisation makes 'reason'—or a cognitive engagement with foundational Islamic texts like the Qur'an and Hadith—central to Islamic authority. Hence, this conceptualisation of 'authority'[2]

[1] As per the research protocol of this study and to uphold participant privacy, all names have been anonymised, except when describing instances or conversations where individuals have provided explicit consent for their names to be disclosed or when referring to instances or conversations in the public domain.

[2] Authority is defined in this paper as the right to exercise power that is legitimate and recognised by consent of those to whom this power is applied. Furthermore, authority 'is the right to act and make laws', which differs from the force of the state to implement and impose those actions, values, or laws (Skalnik 1999, p. 161).

links the ultimate power and truth[3] originating from Allah to certain individuals and institutions that are recognised by others as having the ability and knowledge to make arguments about the 'Truth' through sacred texts. Crucially, Asad also specified the reasons *for* arguing, which all arise from a central purpose, or feature, of the Islamic discursive tradition: establishing 'orthodoxy'. Practitioners of Islam aim to 'achieve coherence' through exercising 'the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones' (1986, pp. 15–17).

While one student asserted that Islamic practice must be prescriptive, uniform, and orthodox, another 'defended' IMI, describing it as a 'neutral space where everyone is free to practice their own sect'. This reframed IMI as a secular refuge accommodating various Islamic orthodoxies but detached from the Islamic discursive tradition itself. Rabia, however, challenged this view, affirming that for IMI, inclusion, non-compulsion, and plurality are inherently Islamic values—a profound expression of faith, not a dilution or neutral 'secular' stance toward it.

IMI's vision invites us, including the anthropologist, to look beyond assumptions of orthodoxy and see how marginalised Muslims can expand our understanding of Islamic authority and imagine a more just future. This is a vision that not only resists religious injustices but, crucially, questions the British state's narrow vision of progressive, inclusive Islam—a vision that too often justifies the securitisation of Muslim communities through the ideological categories of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims (Amir-Moazami 2022; Arif 2021; Brown 2008; Çilingir 2020). Expanding our conception of Islamic power and purpose strengthens the resistance to Islamophobic and racially exclusive forms of 'inclusion'. Rabia asks us to reconsider: Does Islam require orthodoxy, or is orthodoxy just one possible path within a rich and diverse Islamic tradition?

In his critique of Asad's conceptualisation of Islam, Shahab Ahmed stated: 'To conceptualize Islam first and foremost in terms of a concern to prescribe the correct is to lose sight of Islam as an undertaking to explore the meaningful' (2016, p. 287). Ahmed was concerned that an exclusive focus on 'prescriptive' modes of authority eludes a whole category of Islamic meaning-making that valorise exploration, perplexity, paradox, and pluralism. Additionally, a focus on 'reason' and 'reasoning' related to Islamic foundational texts makes the diverse embodied affective, sensorial, and phenomenological explorations of the sacred subservient to, and effects of, orthodox readings of sacred texts (Gonzalez, 2023). Asad formulates 'authority' as power that is ultimately legitimised through textual sources, but the history and anthropology of Islam demonstrate that both the sources and formulations of Islamic authority are not static (DeWeese, 2014, p. 50). As a corrective to orthodoxy-focused conceptions of Islam, Ahmed highlighted 'the authority to explore' as a distinctly Islamic approach to authority and power that exists alongside the orthodoxy-centred ones (2016, p. 282).

[3] The general concept of truth is signified with a small case truth, while the capital case Truth refers to any defined conception of truth.

While Ahmed discussed historical instances of 'explorative modes of Islamic authority', this paper examines a contemporary Islamic setting where such modes are actively embraced. Rather than making theological claims or debating whether this community qualifies as 'Islamic', the paper aims to illuminate the beliefs and practices of a non-conventional and marginalised Muslim group committed to cultivating a pluralistic and inclusive religious space as an Islamic, rather than secular, virtue. Here, Islam is framed as a practice of culturally embedded meaning-making, grounded in the belief that there was a Divine Revelation to Muhammad without restricting the meaning and content of the Revelation to any text, discourse, practice, or experience (Ahmed, 2016; Sulaiman, 2018). In line with Marranci's call to study Islam as 'a map of discourses' on the 'feeling' of being Muslim (Marranci, 2008, p. 8), this study explores the discourses and practices that evoke and shape these feelings. It illustrates how Islam, as a discursive tradition, serves as a source of explorative authority, empowering Muslims at IMI to engage in pluralistic meaning-making during Friday prayers. This process is supported by key features of the ritual, including the gender diversity of ritual leaders, a shared leadership model, an inclusive 'gender expansive' congregation, egalitarian spatial arrangements, evolving concepts of modesty, and the unique style and content of the sermons.

Alternative discursive communities: inclusive Islam as a lived experience

This afternoon exemplified a microcosm of cultural exchange, highlighting a core aspect of IMI's mission: constructing inclusive, intersectional feminist Islamic discourses, practices, and communities ('What We Do' n.d.). IMI was set up in 2012 by two Muslim women activists who sought to put into practice the kinds of inclusion, accessibility, and solidarity with marginalised Muslims that they wanted to experience within UK mosques. The IMI can be considered a part of a broader movement, often referred to as 'progressive' or 'inclusive' Islam, that has emerged in different parts of the world in the twenty-first century, particularly in North America, Western Europe, and South Africa (Calderini, 2021, p. 163). These grassroots Islamic community groups practice Islam based on interpretations of spiritual experiences and sacred texts that value diversity, female ritual leadership, queer affirmation, anti-racism, disability justice, and anti-imperialism.

Most academic work on progressive Muslims has focused on the theological writings and activism of individual academic-activists with hardly any information on the scale of the phenomenon and the way it is lived in the social contexts people inhabit (Duderija, 2011; Grewal, 2014; Hammer, 2012; Safi 2003; Wadud, 2006). Despite a recent survey suggesting that in some social contexts the progressive Muslim discursive category can be quite substantial (Rane & Duderija, 2021), these discursive communities remain marginal both in terms of institutional power within Islamic communities as well as within academic studies of Muslims (Thompson, 2023).

Furthermore, within the anthropological literature, Muslims with progressive, liberal, queer, and feminist perspectives and identities have been linked with secular—non-religious or anti-religious—subjectivities, which often align with the secular state's

political agendas (N. Fadil, 2013; Nadia Fadil, 2017; Fernando, 2009; Mahmood, 2006). On the other hand, the progressive values advocated by inclusive Muslims emerge from their engagement with, and faith in, Islam (Duderija, 2013). In fact, their politics are often deeply critical of the secular state and actively deployed to counter its entanglements with exclusions justified through racialised conceptions of nationalism (Haritaworn et al., 2008; Inclusive Mosque Initiative et al., 2019; Khan, 2021).

Ethnographic studies on progressive Muslim communities are limited but have started to gain traction recently. Specifically, Jesper Petersen's (2022) book on the agency and 'serendipity' that led to the formation of the female-led Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, Tazeen Ali's (2022) book on the Women's Mosque of America (WMA) in Los Angeles, and Katrina Daly Thompson's (2023) book researching the world of nonconformist progressive or inclusive Muslim communities in North America being recent examples of such work. These books describe how Muslims cultivate inclusive *Islamic* subjectivities, interpretations, and communities, not only through interpreting religious texts but, crucially, through the experiences of praying together and reacting to unexpected turn of events. This paper continues the exploration of 'Islam from its lived "edges" rather than its textual centre' (Thompson, 2023, p. 24), but is the first to bring it to the socio-political context of the UK.

Nonconformist Muslims with a focus on inclusivity, social justice, and pluralism use a variety of self-descriptions due to their diverse and non-normative character, but the term 'progressive Muslim' is 'the most widely used and understood label among these groups' (Thompson, 2020, p. 878). This is the term that organises references in academic, activist, and media discourses around Muslims who share broadly similar Islamic beliefs and practices, but there are internal variations and contestations within such groups, including whether the term 'progressive' or 'liberal' is appropriate for them. For instance, the foundational vision of IMI, as expressed by its co-founders, is based more on the value of inclusivity rather than specifying a set of 'liberal' Islamic beliefs:

> Inclusive (understanding and practice of) Islam is theoretically distinct from liberal, progressive, or moderate Islam, although there may be much overlap on certain points. Inclusive Islam, as we understand it, does not set itself in opposition to the conservatives or the 'average' Muslim on the street. We simply aim to provide safe, respectful places for the practice of Islam, and work actively to ensure that everyone is made to feel welcome. (Shannahan & Tauqir, 2016, p. 202)

This quote can be misread with the assumption that this 'safe space' emerges from a secular commitment to plurality and inclusion but—as demonstrated by Rabia's views—for most Muslims at the IMI these are core *Islamic* values.

What is orthodoxy? Discursive traditions and modes of authority

The insistence that an Islamic religious space, and the sacred rituals practiced within it, should cultivate and welcome pluralism and diversity rather than prescribe a 'correct model' often leads to anxieties and questions. For instance, some new attendees

at the IMI wondered if encouraging pluralism and inclusion for different beliefs and practices meant tolerating harm, oppression, or conflict? These concerns are eased when newcomers realise that the idea that ‘anything goes’ does not reign in this religious space as there are frequent announcements, particularly at the beginning of their events, which specify the values they uphold: feminism, equality, and empowering those who are marginalised in other social settings, against all forms of prejudices and discrimination. Anyone violating these principles and values will be initially engaged with so they can learn the ethics of participating at IMI, but if they continue to violate the rules and ethics of the IMI community, they will be excluded from the congregation. This leads to the central questions that guide this article which are the following: (1) Whether the explicit rules of the IMI community are understood as a form of ‘orthodoxy’ by those who participate in it? (2) What does the term ‘orthodox’ mean within the context of this specific Muslim space? The latter is answered in this section of the paper while the former is demonstrated by the ethnographic sections and the concluding discussion.

One approach is to equate ‘orthodoxy’ with the establishment of limits that exclude certain discourses from the ambit of ‘Islam’. For instance, Mohammed Sulaiman reminds us that, ‘exclusion is necessary for the formation of all discourses’ (2018, p. 156). He states that even ‘explorative’ Islamic discourses, like Islamic philosophy and Sufism, establish limits and exclusions even if they do not require a direct hermeneutical engagement with the foundational texts. Hence, Sulaiman argues that the belief in the ‘founding event’ of Islam—the Divine Revelation—is the basis for a ‘universal orthodoxy’ that functions as ‘a master signifier that acts to suture a multiplicity of Islamic entities in the same discursive chain’ (2018, p. 158). Hence, he views ‘orthodoxy’ as central to the conceptualisation of Islam as a discursive tradition but orthodoxy here is the presence of any ‘limit’ that makes the existence of the discourse possible. The ‘universal orthodoxy’ of the Islamic discursive space is itself an ‘empty signifier’ that anchors the discursive universe to a conception of a ‘founding event’—the Muhammad Revelation—without limiting it to any text or any essential content (2018, p. 154).

On the other hand, for Ahmed, orthodoxy is not defined as the presence of limits and exclusions but the attitude towards the truth: ‘The meaningfulness of the term “orthodoxy” is diminished as attitudes towards truth become less restrictive and prescriptive’ (2016, p. 274). Ahmed acknowledges that even the most explorative discourses will have limits, i.e., not everything that Muslims say or do is Islamic (2016, p. 538). Instead, he defines the term ‘orthodox’ as an attitude towards, or belief about, truth-seeking: whether the truth is perceived as fixed, identifiable, coherent, and exclusive. Furthermore, this attitude towards truth requires a form of power that shapes people’s behaviours to conform to the defined range of ‘correct truths’: prescriptive authority. Hence, for Ahmed, orthodoxy lies on one side of a continuum of exclusion where the truth is limited to one, or a defined range of authorised, Truth/s, while exploratory authority lies at the other end of this continuum where ‘un-Truths’ are excluded to enable explorations in the field of ‘Truth’, which itself is left open.

This paper follows this definition of ‘orthodoxy’ to claim that the construction of the Islamic discursive tradition within some inclusive Muslim communities differs from Asad’s conceptualisation of Islam as it does not require ‘the centrality

of the notion of "the correct model" to which an instituted practice—including ritual—ought to conform' (1986, p. 15). Instead, the explorative mode of authority is applied in different ways—through discourses, how the spaces are organised, and the forms of praxes—to encourage a plurality of 'correct' practices while also defining, and fixing, what is proscribed. Hence, this acts as an inverse to the direction of the prescriptive mode of authority as here 'the correct' is varied and cannot be fixed, while the 'incorrect' is limited and defined. Furthermore, the purpose of the explorative mode of authority differs even when it is applying 'limits' as they are meant to facilitate plurality and freedom in meaning-making through Islam rather than a legalistic focus on 'correct and 'incorrect' practices (Ahmed, 2016, p. 274). The following sections will highlight aspects of my ethnography that demonstrate how the IMI community cultivates a form of Islamic discursive tradition that they experience as authentic and ethical while eschewing prescriptive orthodoxy as a purpose of their faith.

Crossing ontological boundaries: conducting ethnography among religious communities

In this paper, I will be describing the Friday prayers gathering at the IMI in London based on my ethnographic fieldwork with the community. I first attended an IMI prayer gathering in November 2016 and I was attracted and intrigued by the congregants' sense of joy in praying together in a mixed-gender congregation where women were empowered to be ritual leaders and how they experienced Islam, sometimes for the first time, as a source of love, belonging, and liberation through this space. I started regularly attending the events organised by the IMI from early 2017 and, thereafter, I received official consent to undertake ethnographic research with IMI in September 2017. I worked as a volunteer, who was also conducting ethnographic research, at IMI till October 2018 and then remained active in the community till early 2020 until in-person events stopped due to Covid-19 restrictions. Thereafter, I have continued to follow the organisation's activities online and have maintained interactions with the friends and colleagues I made at the IMI during my fieldwork. I also recorded audios of twenty in-depth unstructured interviews with board members and volunteers who were active in IMI events and networks during this period.

I cultivated knowledge and understanding of inclusive Muslim subjectivities not only through the 'cognitive route' achieved through conversations, readings, and observations but also through the 'embodied route' of participating in different types of rituals, like the prayers, *dhikr*[4] sessions, and *halaqah*[5] gatherings. If we see rituals as less an expression of our prior and 'authentic' beliefs but as embodied actions used to attain certain kinds of dispositions, moral capacities, and subjectivities (Mahmood, 2001, p. 843), then such active participation in rituals provides

[4] *Dhikr* is the practice of melodic and repetitive chanting of the names of Allah.

[5] *Halaqah* refers to Qur'an study and discussion circles.

a reflexive phenomenological understanding of a specific ontology that cannot be experienced 'outside its peculiar embodied articulation' (Baldacchino, 2019, p. 365). This embodied 'felt sense' approach conforms with recent trends in anthropological research that call for ethnography that transforms our *selves* and our epistemological and ontological assumptions (Glass-Coffin 2010; Kripal, 2004; Robbins, 2006; Vicini & Di Puppo, 2024; Willerslev & Suhr, 2018). Hence, this is not 'objective' knowledge that leaves the subjectivity of the researcher untouched but, instead, an attempt to 'occupy the ontological penumbra' (Merz & Merz, 2017) through the active cultivation of one's disposition through the embodied practices of our interlocutors.

Furthermore, this approach aligns with the explorative authority being practiced at the IMI as it involves accessing 'Divine truth' through multiple routes, including affective and sensorial ones. As Valerie Gonzalez writes, 'this mute affective-sensorial component of the Islamic tradition has yet to be fully grasped as the equal counterpart to its discursive dimension' (2023, p. 2). As a researcher, I aimed to match the emphasis on multiple sources of 'truth' in both the Islam practised at the IMI and the theoretical concept of 'explorative authority' with a methodology that also placed premium not only on 'understanding' and 'thinking' but also on 'feeling' and 'sensing'.

One of the main avenues to *feel* and *sense* the Islamic discourses at IMI was through the act of praying together during the fortnightly in-person congregational prayers. Reflecting the central importance of prayers in the Islamic tradition, the IMI considers offering inclusive Friday communal prayers its *raison d'être* and its key organising ritual. All other IMI activities, work, and rituals include the core activity of prayers because they aspire to integrate cultural, social, and intellectual aspects of Islam with 'the spiritual and practice-based experience of prayer' (Shannahan & Tauqir, 2016, p. 202). Therefore, to understand IMI in terms of its Islamic discourse, it is crucial to get a sense of their core practice, the Friday congregational prayers, which I will now explore deeper.

Cultivating inclusivity: spatial, discursive, and embodied dimensions of the IMI

As of 2024, the IMI operated as, what can be referred as, a 'pop-up mosque' (Petersen, 2019, p. 178), with various physical and online locations, but they aspire to build a purpose-built intersectional feminist mosque in Central London that would be fully accessible for disabled people and would operate according to their inclusive ethos. During the time I was conducting my fieldwork with them (2017–2019), they were hosting most of their fortnightly Friday prayers in a room in a Central London 'radically inclusive' Church, called 'New Unity' (New Unity, 2021).

The spatial features of the venues that the IMI chose to host its events and rituals in demonstrated its non-hierarchical and inclusive atmosphere. They chose spaces that imbued a sense of relaxed and open conversations in an intimate setting through its size and set-up, as well as a sense of an equality among all congregants by ensuring that people were organised in a way where they were not segregated or hierarchically differentiated from each other. The venue of the Friday prayers was

deliberately chosen based on aligned values and goals, i.e. accessibility, intersectional solidarity, accountability, inclusivity, feminism, and diversity. Similarly, the venues for the other events they held—*halaqah*, Ramadan events, *Ashura*,[6] *Arba 'in*,[7] Eid celebrations, conferences, talks, meetings, trainings, IMI anniversary celebrations, and social parties—were also based in central London and chosen to reflect the inclusive ethos of the community.

Accessibility and inclusivity were key criterion for choosing the physical spaces for holding IMI events. IMI required that all their events occur in spaces that are wheelchair accessible (with accessible toilets as well) with accessible public transportation links and availability of induction loop systems. They also prioritised accessibility and inclusivity in the space by trying, as much as possible, to reserve a separate space during events that served as a 'quiet or wellness room', have a sign language interpreter present, use signage with large and high contrast font, train volunteers and staff on disability justice, and make gender-neutral toilet options available.

In the prayer room, there was an absence of an elevated platform or pulpit (*minbar*), lectern, or even differentiating chairs for the ritual leader (*khatib* or imam),[8] which symbolised the spiritual and temporal parity of the *imam* and other ritual leaders to the congregation. The prayer room was moderately sized and could accommodate up to twenty people comfortably. There were chairs lining one of the side walls of the room for attendees to use if they preferred to sit and observe, meditate, or socialise. Some chairs would be placed to face the *qiblah* and be right behind the standing communal praying space, marked by green sheets, to accommodate those who used them due to disabilities, age, or personal preferences. In front of the communal prayer space, there was the space for the *khatib*/imam with its own prayer sheet and/or a prayer rug (*sajjada*).

On the other side wall, a table would be laid out with a few snacks, coffee, and various types of tea bags for the participants as well as a donation box for the IMI. The volunteers made sure that the snacks were always halal and prioritised other dietary needs and preferences, like providing gluten-free, locally sourced, organic, and vegan options. The snacks were usually consumed after the prayers as this encouraged the attendees to stay and socialise with each other after the prayer ritual concluded. This was usually the most casual part of the Friday prayer ritual when the congregants not only discussed the *khutbah* among each other and with the *khatib*/imam, but also cultivated community bonds and a shared identity by sharing their personal lives, exchanging jokes, engaging in heated political debates, and working out shared values and group boundaries. The overall affective atmosphere created by these arrangements was collegial, which aimed to make people feel part of a spiritual community where they were equally capable as others in contributing to Islamic meaning-making.

[6] Tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram. It is an important day in the Shi 'i. religious calendar as they mourn the death of the third imam, Husayn ibn Ali.

[7] A Shi 'i religious observation that occurs forty days after the day of *Ashura*.

[8] The person giving a sermon during communal prayers.

One of the most important material possessions that the IMI had was a large black bag with wheels that was informally referred to as 'The IMI Bag'. When I was volunteering at the IMI, I was frequently given the responsibility of accessing the IMI bag from the New Unity Church and bringing it to other venues where they planned to construct a pop-up mosque space since congregational prayers were a feature of almost all IMI events. This was the bag that had all the basic materials needed to set up a prayer space anywhere, allowing the IMI to remain relatively mobile and 'nomadic' (Shannahan & Tauqir, 2016, p. 206). One of the co-founders of the mosque remarked to me that the bag holds an important symbolic importance for IMI—just as it does for other similar inclusive pop-up mosques in Western countries (Petersen, 2019)—as it represents the mosque as a grass-roots spiritual space that is connected to local communities and is flexible, innovative, adaptable, varied, and egalitarian.

Moving and feeling with others but in one's own way: the IMI Jumu'ah ritual

The roles of imam, *khatib*, and *mu'adhin*[9] would sometimes be performed by separate people, but usually the *khutbah* (sermon) was given by the imam leading the prayers while the *mu'adhin* was often someone separate from the *khatib*/imam. The *khatib*/imam would either sit on the floor on the prayer rug in front of the communal praying space or be seated on a chair facing the congregants. The *mu'adhin* would open the prayer space with an *adhan* (call to prayers) while facing the *qiblah* and be placed on the right side of the *khatib*/imam who, if a different person, would be sitting facing the congregation. The *adhan* was simultaneously translated in the British Sign Language (BSL) either by the *mu'adhin* or, more frequently, by someone else in the congregation. There are minor differences in the call to prayers between the Sunni and Shi 'i traditions and the IMI encouraged *mu'adhins* who represented different traditions, or those who were willing to perform according to different traditions. The representation of how minority sects perform prayers was considered important to counteract the tendency of Sunni practice being considered the 'default', 'neutral', or normative approach in mixed sectarian spaces, i.e. Sunni-normativity.[10]

This call to prayers would usually take place around 15–20 min before the *khutbah* was due to begin, and it marked the time when congregants could choose to offer their voluntary (*nafl*) prayers individually or behind the imam. The prayers at this time were not offered in unison as individuals would start their prayers whenever they entered the prayer room or according to their preferences. While most congregants would offer the four full iterations of the prescribed movements that form one unit of *salah* (*raka 'ah*) at this time, based on the standard practices of Shi 'i and Sunni traditions, others followed different Muslim traditions or had their own

[9] The person who performs the call to prayers.

[10] This concern for representing and encouraging different sectarian practices and beliefs and countering Sunni-normativity in progressive Muslim spaces in North America has been discussed in detail by Katrina Daly Thompson (2023, p. 125).

idiosyncratic preferences in terms of how many *raka 'ah* they chose to pray, how they chose to do so, and whether they chose to offer these supererogatory prayers at all. This practice is worth noticing since most mosques encourage congregants to practice the traditions of the specific sect (Shi 'i, Sunni), or sub-sect (Barelvi, Deobandi or Ahl-i-Hadith), the mosque belongs to, even if they consider other approaches valid, as uniformity in practice is considered essential for the validity and coherence of ritual practice (Bowen, 2010, p. 85).

Thereafter, there was another *adhan* right before the *khatib* began delivering their sermon. Right after the *khutbah* concluded, a member of the congregation, usually the same person who served as the *mu'adhin*, would offer the *iqamah*.[11] The exact format of the *iqamah* would also deliberately vary over the weeks to represent the practices of the different schools and sects of Islam. Attendees who wished to participate in the two full congregational cycles of prayer movements (*raka 'ah*), which are considered obligatory (*fard*) by Sunni and most Shi 'i Muslims, lined up in straight parallel rows (*saf*)—which meant that they stood shoulder-to-shoulder with each other without any gender segregation—or they sat in the chairs behind the standing worshippers while the imam would lead them from the front. Usually, at this time, the volunteers would remind people—especially those who were new to this space—that there was no gender segregation, and they could move forward in the prayer rows as the volunteers hoped to counteract the belief, and habit, that only men should stand in the front rows. Thereafter, the imam and the worshippers (*musalli*) would all face the direction of the *qiblah* and offer the prayers in unison but, importantly, *not* always in the same way. The imam would open the prayers with a *takbir* (*Allahu Akbar*) and then loudly and melodically recite *surah Al-Fatihah*, the first chapter of the Qurʾan, followed by another portion of the Qurʾan, according to their preference.

Katrina Daly Thompson uses the term 'gender expansive' to distinguish the ways gender is imagined and spatially organised in nonconformist progressive Muslims compared to both 'liberal' and traditional congregations (2023, p. 70). The traditional practice in most mosques is for women to occupy the rows behind the male prayer rows, or to be segregated through veiled sections or separate rooms (Calderini, 2021, p. 165). Some 'liberal' Muslim congregations challenge this traditional spatiality of gender by performing 'gender-integrated' prayers, which place men and women side-by-side in gender segregated rows, which is meant to symbolise gender equality as women are not placed behind men. Gender-expansive prayers, on the other hand, are meant to overcome some of the perceived limitations of 'gender-integrated' spatial arrangements as they do not require people to arrange themselves according to the gender binary, thereby they are inclusive of worshippers who are trans, intersex, non-binary, or genderqueer. Hence a 'gender-expansive' congregation removes gender identity as a marker that determines where a person will stand or sit during the performance of the ritual. In practice, this means that everyone is welcome to stand shoulder-to-shoulder regardless of the gender identity or the gender-expression of the person next to them (Thompson, 2023, p. 82).

[11] A modified *adhan* given immediately before the congregational prayers in a more quick and less melodic manner.

Another important difference from the traditional ritual is that the congregants themselves were also free to follow their own preferred prayer practices *during* the congregational prayer, *even if these diverged from the imam*. While there is a broad consensus among most Muslim schools, traditions, and sects on how to perform the Friday *salah*, there are a few key differences in details, e.g. where, or if, to fold arms, the position of the feet and legs, the focus of the eyes, the loudness of recitation, the use of *turbah*,[12] the recitation of *du 'a*[13] *Qunut*, and how the end of the prayer is marked. The congregants at IMI were encouraged to pray in the way that they 'feel comfortable with' and informed emphatically that the IMI endorses diversity in how Islamic rituals are performed by believers. For example, some congregants might hold their hands to their sides, performatively symbolising their affiliation with the Shi 'i tradition, while others may fold their hands on their abdomen, representing the practice of the Hanafi Sunni tradition.

Finally, the IMI congregational prayers would conclude with the imam offering traditional blessings to Allah and the Prophet, reciting a few prayers, and then inviting everyone to offer a collective *du 'a*. Thereafter, some congregants chose to continue offering other supererogatory prayers, while others would use this part of the Friday gathering to socialise with each other over the snacks and beverages laid out on the table. Meanwhile, the volunteers would gradually gather the different things that the IMI owns for creating the prayer space and place them all back in the 'IMI Bag', thereby converting the space from a 'pop-up mosque' space to one that could be used for other secular and religious purposes.

Applying Bowen's approach of examining Islamic rituals not just as a series of sacred practices but also as *performative* of core social values (2012, p. 50), the way the congregants arrange themselves during the Friday prayers at IMI *diagrams* the worth of social values, like egalitarian universalism, and makes claims about the nature of gender, i.e. gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. The encouragement of women to occupy the front rows of prayers and the visible plurality of different sectarian prayer practices at the IMI *indexes* diversity and the inclusion of those who are otherwise marginalised. Hence, the Friday prayer is *performative* in the sense that it makes an inclusive and pluralistic Islamic discursive tradition a lived reality and subjective experience for the congregants.

Shared ritual leadership at the IMI

In contrast to other mosques, the imams at IMI do not derive their legitimacy from more established Muslim sources of authority, whether it is support from the international centres of Sunni or Shi 'i authority and learning, like Al-Azhar or the seminaries (*hawzah*) in Qom or Najaf, or from more established British-Muslim institutions, like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB). Instead, the source of legitimacy for the imams

[12] Clay tablets made of soil from Karbala. Used by Shi 'i Muslims to prostrate on.
during prayers.

[13] Supplicatory prayer.

at the IMI is entirely through the mutual consensus and consent bestowed by the IMI community upon each other. One of the volunteers, referred to as the *Jumu'ah* coordinator, was responsible for recruiting volunteers who would set up the prayer space and take up the three ritual roles of the *mu'adhin*, *khatib*, and imam.

The absence of a specialised ritual leader or specialist at the IMI was not due to an absence of people who were recognised by the community as having religious and ritual expertise; nor was it due to an absence of individuals who were recognised as having achieved greater piety relative to other congregants, moral self-development, and religiosity. Instead, ritual authority and legitimacy was based on a mutually bestowed recognition that all congregants who participate in the community are genuinely seeking spiritual enlightenment and self-actualisation and, hence, can facilitate mutual learning and growth through the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Hence, the mosque followed a 'shared authority' approach to leadership where volunteers from the congregation change their roles weekly, thereby potentially allowing all members of the congregation the chance to participate in one of the ritual roles if they feel inclined to do so. Shared authority as a term has been credited to the African American, progressive Muslim imam, Nakia Johnson, who considers it a core principle for establishing an inclusive Muslim community as it expands inclusion from the diversity within congregations to the distribution of the power to construct the community (Thompson, 2023, p. 155).

Furthermore, in the case of traditional mosques, the leadership roles are confined to Muslims and even the type of Muslim (sect, sub-sect) is specified, while in the case of the IMI, the role of the imam was usually—but not always—performed by a Muslim without there being a bar on the *type*. The basic criterion for taking a leadership role was the ability and willingness to be sensitive to the central value of being inclusive, especially towards those Muslims who are marginalised in other religious and secular spaces.

Another area where 'leadership' was exercised in a pluralistic and bottom-up manner was how clothing choices were left at the discretion of the congregants and announcements were made to stress that no one should police others dressing. There was no dress code requirement for either the ritual leaders or the congregants, and women were not required to cover their hair at any point although many chose to do so. This reflects the alternative understanding of 'modesty' within many non-conformist, inclusive, Muslim spaces where it refers to how a person manages their social gaze, behaviours, intentions, thoughts, and impulses to cultivate safety, respect, and equality rather than referring to how a person dresses or manages their potential to distract or seduce another person (Thompson, 2023, p. 92). Hence, these aspects of how power and leadership was distributed empowered community members to view Islam as a source of explorative authority; i.e. the Islamic discursive tradition gives believers the authority to explore meaning and truth.

Discursive inclusion and diversity: the sermons at the IMI

Reflecting the modality of power that engages with the Islamic discursive tradition to cultivate a 'safe space' for diverse communal religious practices, the style and

themes of IMI sermons also cultivated future-oriented, creative, egalitarian, and inclusive Islamic discourses. Between July 2016 and August 2018, there were at least 20 different *khatibs* at IMI Friday prayers. These *khatibs* almost always also served as the imam for the *Jumuʿah* prayers after their sermons. I will highlight some of the social identities of the ritual leaders at the IMI that are considered salient and relevant by the community.

During this period—based only on either explicit self-identification or social cues and how others address a person—there were 12 *khatib*s/imams who had 'female' as part of their gender identity, with ten cis-gender women, one trans woman, and one non-binary femme person. There were eight cis-gender male *khatib*s/imams. There was an equal distribution of people who identified as 'straight' (heterosexual) and those who identified as part of the Queer spectrum, including—but not limited to—gay, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual people. I was aware of at least two individuals who had visible, or chose to share their, disabilities. In terms of the demographic breakdown in my data for the *khatib*s/imams, two were from Afro-Caribbean and African backgrounds, ten from South Asian backgrounds, four from Arabic backgrounds, one from a Kurdish background, one from a white European background (German), and two were of mixed heritage. Although the congregation as a whole was more diverse in all these demographic features, these leadership roles still broadly reflected the demographics of the congregation since they were voluntary roles that the congregants chose to undertake.

Overall, all *khutbah* sessions were delivered in English with a smattering of other language terms and vocabulary (usually Arabic, Urdu, and Turkish), while the Qurʾanic verses were usually recited in Classical Arabic and then followed immediately with an English translation. Most people in the *khatib* role would choose to sit on the prayer rug in front of the congregation rather than stand while delivering the sermon. The *khutbah* often followed the traditional format of being divided into two parts separated by a short break with the first part being longer than the second one. The sermons would often refer to other belief systems and focused on the themes of inclusiveness, egalitarianism, encouraging ethical behaviour without evoking divine retribution, good psychological health, social justice, and solidarity with oppressed communities.

Furthermore, unlike more traditional models of sermons as a genre with a 'transmission model' of preaching *to* the congregation that assumes a certain level of elevated knowledge (Antoun, 2014), pedigree, and authority, the model at IMI differentiates itself by its shared authority approach. Therefore, most of the people who volunteered for the *khatib* role at the IMI followed a 'constructivist' pedagogical model, one where people actively co-create knowledge and the *khatib* acts more as a facilitator than as an expert on a topic (Phillips, 1995). This can be seen in the frequent use of 'equalising' statements in the sermons: 'I am not an expert but just sharing my limited views and knowledge'; 'please take from my *khutbah* what is useful for you and discard what you do not find accurate or useful'; 'any mistakes I make are mine alone and any benefit I provide is from Allah alone'; 'I apologise if I offend anyone and I ask for your forgivingness'; 'please feel free to disagree with me'; 'please ask questions'; 'I encourage you to discuss this sermon with me'; and 'I hope we can use this *khutbah* to learn from each other'.

Each *khatib* designed their own sermons and most chose to deliver the *khutbah* in more casual and unconventional styles and formats than are customary. Specifically,

the *khutbah* sessions varied significantly in aspects like the degree of interaction and discussion between the *khatib* and the congregants; the use of multimedia; whether classical Arabic was used when quoting from the Qurʾan; the length of the sermon; and whether the *khatib* chose to remain seated while delivering the sermon or delivered it while standing, following the traditional practice. This freedom and flexibility also meant that the IMI as an organisation expected each *khatib* to make clear that the content of their sermons was their personal position and not necessarily reflective of the official position of the organisation.

What is Islam? Expanding the purpose of the Islamic discursive tradition

The type of Islamic discursive tradition that we have been exploring has limits and exclusions but in ways that leave the domain of 'correct' beliefs and practices relatively open, flexible, and plural. How does this fit with Asad's claim that 'orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions' (1986, p. 15)? For Asad, the very concept of a 'discursive tradition' is related to a specific mode of authority that is defined by its will to 'prescribe' and 'proscribe' practices to conform to 'the correct model'.

In Asad's theoretical model, the concept of 'orthodoxy' is essential for understanding both change and diversity, as well as continuity and uniformity, within the Islamic discursive tradition. Ovamir Anjum argues that even though there is 'a tension, or ambiguity, that exists within Asad's elaboration of the idea of discursive tradition', it can be removed by spelling out that there are two types of concepts of orthodoxy in Asad's formulation: orthodoxy-as-power and Orthodoxy 'with a capital O' (2007, p. 666). While the former refers to the 'local orthodoxies' resulting from varying power relations vying to establish a prescriptive and prohibitive 'correct model', the latter refers to a translocal and 'networked' Orthodoxy, which emerges from the 'idea of a rational discursive tradition…[where] certain interpretations and transformations are legitimate while others are not, regardless of the attempts of local powers to assert otherwise' (2007, p. 669). Anjum views this trans-local Orthodoxy—or 'universal orthodoxy' (Sulaiman, 2018)—as a relationship with the foundational texts of the Qurʾan and Hadith, which limits, without fixing, the types of interpretations, arguments, and reasoning of the thinking subject (2007, p. 667).

While this avoids the pitfalls of essentialism by acknowledging the immense diversity, pluralism, and change within the discursive tradition, it also reduces them as consequences of the, unintended and undesired, 'constraints of the political and economic conditions' (1986, p. 17) rather than virtues within, or the purpose of, the Islamic discursive tradition. In fact, heterogeneity and change within the Islamic discursive tradition are explained as emerging from the fact that all power is accompanied by 'resistance'. While this resistance seeks to challenge a local orthodoxy, it is not a challenge to the *desire to establish orthodoxy* itself, as it also utilises 'reason and argument' to establish new orthodoxies through claims of more 'apt performance' of historically 'instituted' practices (Asad, 1986, p. 15). Anthropologists following his approach, like Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), also acknowledge the role of the Islamic discursive tradition in creating both

personal and social change but in 'the direction of alignment with norms' justified as the reproduction of historically established practices (Thompson, 2023, p. 8).

Consequently, this conceptualisation of the Islamic discursive tradition restricts it to those beliefs and practices that were orthodox in the past, are the orthodoxy in the present, or seek a future orthodoxy. This is a point that Ahmed makes forcibly when he states that Asad replaces the nominalist view that Islam is 'whatever Muslims say it is' with 'whatever Muslims say it is *authoritatively*' (2016, p. 272) and, thereby, 'functions superbly as a conceptualization of *orthodoxy* as a discursive tradition, but not of *Islam* as a discursive tradition' (2016, p. 290). He argues that while the conceptualisation of Islam as a discursive tradition is a productive analytical strategy, it needs a broader conception of the sources and purpose of authority.

Highlighting 'explorative authority' as an aspect of the Islamic discursive tradition enables the anthropology of Islam to account for a larger variety of Islamic discourses, practices, and communities. For instance, it allows us to understand the discourses and practices being cultivated at the IMI as *Islamic* even when they do not emphasise 'correctness' and 'traditional practice'. Furthermore, it also helps with understanding why many observers—both Muslim and non-Muslim—struggle with reconciling inclusive Muslim discourses within their concept of Islam, or why they try to fit such discourses into the domain of the 'secular' instead. As Ahmed writes, 'The conceptual and analytical deficiency in emphasizing orthodoxy as constitutive of Islam is that…a statement or practice that is not directed at the authoritative establishment of correctness appears to us less (or not) Islamic' (2016, p. 284).

Hence, returning to the question asked earlier: Are the explicit rules of the IMI community understood as a form of 'orthodoxy' by those who participate in it? For the regular participants, whether as congregants and/or leaders, within the IMI, the limiting of Divine truths to certain specified legal or ritualistic prescriptions is considered untenable due to the diversity of beliefs and practices they seek to welcome in their religious spaces. In this case, the community of believers seek to cultivate an attitude towards religious truths that is open-ended and views Islam as a discursive tradition that does not necessitate 'orthodoxy'.

'Don't just think, feel': exploring the different modes of Islamic power

During one of the Friday sermons at the IMI, the *khatib* encouraged the congregants to take a pause to silence the 'thinking' self and observe their bodies for feelings, sensations, and emotions as she viewed them as guides towards the Divine 'truth'. By centring both the somatic and cognitive dimensions of Islam, this approach expands the sources and purpose of Islamic authority. It invites congregants to find meaning through a deep exploration of Allah's Revelation—not only within sacred texts but also through their own embodied, sacred experiences—nurturing an inherently pluralistic experience of lived Islam.

I have described the IMI's core goal of providing an 'alternative Islamic space' where members of the Muslim community who feel excluded or unsafe in other religious spaces can feel safe and empowered. This inclusive Muslim community

interprets and practices Islam through the values of equality, diversity, and social justice. I have highlighted some relevant spatial, performative, and discursive features of the Friday prayers at IMI to demonstrate how congregants practice and construct their Islamic moral personhoods. Hence, we observe their values within the symbolic geography of the mosque itself (e.g. the absence of hierarchical structures like the lectern), the diversity within the congregational Friday prayers, the role of non-traditional ritual leaders (e.g. women, trans, and non-binary individuals), and the content and style of the sermons (interactive, pluralistic, and non-hierarchical).

Based on these ethnographic experiences, I argue for an expansion of Talal Asad's concept of the 'discursive tradition' of Islam on three levels. Firstly, by echoing Mara Leichtman's call to 'open up' Asad's approach by including practices that are not yet historically established but re-work the past with a future-orientation (2015, p. 202). The Muslims at IMI refer to the Islamic tradition's past to find principles and models for non-traditional and novel practices, like gender- and sect-expansive Friday prayers. This 'discursive futurism' of 'nonconformist' inclusive Muslims disrupt 'notions of orthodoxy, correctness, or normativity altogether' (Thompson, 2023, p. 9).

Secondly, while Asad's approach encourages a deeper look at the embodiment of discourses as complementary to text-based reasoning, his approach to the Islamic discursive tradition necessarily requires a cognitive engagement with 'the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith' (1986, p. 14). Understanding how inclusive Muslims practice and engage with Islam opens discussions on whether embodied, phenomenological, and intercorporeal lived experiences—affect, sensations, feelings, intuitions, social emotions and bonds, and mystical experiences—may play an equal, or even greater, role in defining Islamic discursive traditions (Ahmed, 2016, pp. 289–290; Gonzalez, 2023).

Finally, the IMI offers an example of a broader approach to Islamic authority by demonstrating that it can exist in relatively non-orthodox modes that actively cultivate a diversity in both 'correct' Islamic beliefs and, crucially, the *practices* associated with those ideas of 'correctness'. This differs from 'orthodox' approaches as the limits and boundaries nurture discursive and embodied spaces where 'exploratory authority' enables creative, diverse, and evolving expressions of Muslim subjectivities, communities, identities, practices, and beliefs. Thus, although communities like IMI may be considered marginal and heterodox, studying these inclusive Muslim spaces provides profound insights into how these communities construct Islam as a source of inclusion, plurality, and liberation for Muslim women and marginalised Muslims. They challenge not only religious injustices but, importantly, the exclusions embedded in secular state-driven inclusion discourses and their securitisation of Muslim communities. By following their conceptualisation of the Islamic discursive tradition, we uncover new and transformative Islamic politics that expand the understanding of Islam as an object of study and a lived reality.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the ethnographic material, which contains information that could compromise research participant privacy and confidentiality. Access to the data is restricted to protect the anonymity of participants, in accordance with standard anthropological practices for safeguarding sensitive ethnographic data. Requests for access will be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to ethical review and appropriate data protection agreements.

Declarations

Ethics approval The research was approved by the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography Research Ethics Committee (SAME REC), University of Oxford (Ref No: SAME_C1A_17_059).

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