How Muslims in Hong Kong Deal with the "Lure" of Secularity

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Abstract: Hong Kong can be considered as having a social atmosphere in which religiosity is not much of an expectation. Having this understanding of "secularity" in my mind, in this paper I look into how some of Hong Kong's Muslims configure their bonds with their faith as a result of inhabiting this social atmosphere. By being a participant observer in Islamic sites, events, and gatherings I try to draw a picture of the place of Islam in Hong Kong and by conducting in-depth interviews I aim to understand how some Muslim migrants (re-)configure their relationship to their faith in this social context. I believe that the modern construct of religion as a rigid framework belonging to a supernatural domain creates discourses that produce further categories such as 'cultural Islam'. And I argue that Muslims' understanding of the concept of cultural Islam plays a crucial role in shaping the religious life they intend to follow, the social relations they wish to construct, and the identities that they end up equipping themselves with in a place like Hong Kong. Through my argument, I also wish to present the diverse understandings, practices, and aspirations that emerge within the multicultural Muslim community of Hong Kong while challenging Talal Asad's suggestion that Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition.

Introduction

Throughout Islamic history, starting from the life of Prophet Muhammad in the 6th century CE, Muslims have mostly been concerned with spreading the message of Islam to wider territories, contending that Islam transcends differences. This can be observed in Mecca where Muslims all around the world come to perform their mandatory religious duty of *hajj* (pilgrimage), or in the historic spread of Islam through holy wars or trade. Thus, if we are to trace globalization to the premodern period when the Silk Road was of significant importance to prosperity (Steger 2017), it can be argued that *Islam* and *globalization* have been inter-connected concepts. Globalization's time-space compression (Harvey 1989) eased the spread of Islam's message to the globe. However, the integration of Islam into different cultures has given rise to many debates that concern the "purity" of Islamic practices and ideas. The discourse questioning how "pure/true" or how "cultural" one's practice of Islam is, became more relevant in modernity as many Muslims migrated to places where Islam played a minor role in daily life. As a result, some Muslims not only had to negotiate their differences, which derived from their practice of Islam, but also had to (re-)construct their ideas and practice of Islam while being exposed to a new environment (Ali 2018). One such place is Hong Kong where Islam belongs to a minority but Muslims such as traders, domestic helpers, and students cannot alienate themselves from the everyday lives of Hong Kongers. In this paper, I look into how Muslim migrants construct or deconstruct their bonds with Islam, given the minimal social pressure on religiosity and indifference to personal religious life in Hong Kong. In what ways do individuals reflect on their relationship with their previous faith once they step out of their Islamic social circle in their home countries? How do they re-orient their position towards Islam given the ease of access to *haram* (Islamic prohibitions) in Hong Kong? To what extent does Islam become the central focus

of Muslims that start a new life in Hong Kong? To find answers to these questions, I have followed participant-observation methods to get to know the Islamic community in Hong Kong and have interviewed people of various backgrounds, practices, and ideas of Islam. Based on the responses I got, I argue that the modern perception of 'religion', as a rigid set of rules that belong to the domain of the "supernatural", produces discourses concerning what is "cultural" and what is "Islamic". I also try to shed light on how Muslims' different ideologies of "cultural" Islam play a crucial role in shaping their decisions concerning the religious life they want to follow, the social relations they attempt to build, and the identities they want to be clothed in—in a place like Hong Kong.

Research Methods

At the start of my research, in order to find more about Hong Kong's Islamic community, I did field visits to various Islamic sites in Hong Kong such as mosques, *madrasahs* (Islamic schools), Islamic centers, and cemeteries and took part in several Islamic events held by the Muslim youth as a participant-observer. However, my knowledge of Hong Kong's Islamic community was not limited to my observations during my research, as I was already involved in the community through various means as a result of my faith and my presence in Hong Kong as an international undergraduate student. After my visits, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with Muslims and people with an Islamic background (see Table 1 below). I met my interviewees either via mutual friends or via other social networks that I was able to access within the community. Most of the interviewees were either university students or fresh graduates with an international background, while some others were local Muslims who have spent a portion of their time abroad. Due to COVID-19 and the rise of the popularity of online meetings, I provided both face-to-face and

online meeting options for my respondents; and most of them preferred the latter one. My findings were not limited to the in-depth interviews that I conducted as I also had numerous casual conversations with Muslims from my own social network—which helped me gain a more holistic view of the topic. My motivation in choosing this topic lies in my own curiosity as a Muslim myself who often comes across similar discussions both in everyday conversations with Muslims concerning the issues they face and in scholarly arguments.

Name	Ethnic Background	Sex	Occupation
Akhat	Kazakh	Male	University student
Amira	Indian *(born and raised in Hong Kong)*	Female	Private company employee (fashion industry)
Aslon	Tajik	Male	University student
Aysha	Chinese *(born and raised in Hong Kong)*	Female	University staff member
Fardin	Bangladeshi	Male	University student
Gurban	Turkmen	Male	University student
Layla	Chinese *(born and raised in Hong Kong)*	Female	Private company employee
Nabeeh	Bangladeshi *(born and raised in Hong Kong)*	Male	Software engineer
Salman	Bangladeshi *(born and raised in Hong Kong)*	Male	University student

Shahid	Pakistani	Male	University student

Table 1

As it will be evident, the reason this paper focuses more on the informant Fardin, compared to others, is due to him being the only one who identified as an agnostic—thus, emerging as a case that needed more intellectual spotlight. And the reason this paper does not include a particularly large number of people lies in the fact that it was originally written for an undergraduate thesis with a certain limit of expectation both in comprehensiveness and words.

Islam in Hong Kong

According to the 2016 census, Muslims make up 4.1% of Hong Kong's population. Out of 300,000 Muslims in Hong Kong, 150,000 are Indonesians, 50,000 are Chinese, 30,000 are Pakistanis, and people from other parts of the world make up the rest (HKSAR Government Home Affairs Bureau 2016). The first Muslims that arrived in the city are believed to be South Asians who served in the British Army in the first half of the 19th century when Hong Kong was a British colony. Eventually, Chinese Muslims have joined immigration waves from Mainland China to form the majority of Hong Kong's Muslim population until the 1990s when Hong Kong turned to Indonesia in its demand for foreign female domestic helpers (O'Connor 2012).

Today, there are six principal mosques and two Muslim cemeteries. Although the majority of worshippers that come to these mosques tends to be of South Asian origin, the cemeteries consist of gravestones which mostly have Hui names written in Chinese characters (Fig. 1). Such

divided ethnic clusters in Hong Kong's Muslim community are evident in the social life of Hong

Kong's Muslims who rarely cross their social circle which centers on a specific ethnic identity.

Hence, as Aysha (one of the respondents whom I will touch upon later) expressed her discomfort

with the situation: "The Muslim community in Hong Kong is very divided and lacks unity".

This, I believe, is a problem that is not peculiar to Hong Kong but concerns the global Muslim

community as a whole (*ummah*[1]), due to the lack of central authority in Islam today, following

the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century (Bowen 2012, 174).

Fig. 1

Many local Muslims that I have talked to had varying opinions about the ease of practicing their

religion in Hong Kong. Some mentioned how Hong Kong people were not Islamophobic,

compared to some people in the West, and how people in Hong Kong respected religious beliefs

in general; while others talked about the difficulty of performing certain Islamic practices such as

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[1] *Ummah* is the Arabic word for "community" and is a synonym for *ummat al-Islam* meaning the collective community of Islamic people.

finding *halal*[2] food or having to wash certain parts of their body (*wudu*[3]) in public bathrooms before fulfilling their religious obligation of performing daily prayers. The problems that they mentioned, like the "awkwardness" of "washing your feet in public bathrooms" (as part of taking *wudu*) in a place like Hong Kong, did not result in voiced reactions from non-Muslims — as many Muslims and foreigners that I know claim that Hong Kongers "just don't care about what you do" and "are indifferent to your life". Therefore, I believe, one can argue that Hong Kong has minimal social and legal pressure on Islam and religious practices in general (O'Connor 2010; O'Connor 2012, 85). In this writing, I would like to focus precisely on how this liberty provided by Hong Kong's social atmosphere, affects or alters the religious practices and ideas of Muslims who may have formerly spent their lives in Islamic societies/cultures where religion was deeply embedded in the everyday. How does a Muslim view his/her faith and his/her religious practices once s/he steps into a world where Islamic devotion is not a social expectation anymore? Would committing to a path of piety in a "pressure-free" context correspond to pursuing "pure/true Islam" whereas one's previous cultural mimicry of Islamic practices be considered as "cultural Islam"? If such a binary distinction exists in the discourses among Muslims, how do Muslims themselves make sense of these concepts and to what extent do they adopt secular values that their new life may center on? In addition to pursuing such questions

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[2] *Halal* means "permitted" in Arabic. It is contrasted with *haram*, meaning "forbidden". These terms are often used in relation to food and many other aspects that cover the everyday life of the believer. In general, every food is considered *halal* unless it is specially prohibited by the Quran or *hadith* (the prophet's sayings). Some of the foods which are not considered halal are alcoholic drinks and intoxicants, pork, meat of carnivorous animals and other animals that are slaughtered without the invocation of God's name, non-halal animal fat, and any food contaminated with the mentioned products.

[3] *Wudu*, a type of ritual purification, is the Islamic procedure for cleansing some parts of the body. It consists of washing the face, arms, wiping the head, and the washing of the feet. It is typically performed as an obligatory preparation for the prayer (*salat*).

within the context of Hong Kong's Muslim migrants, I also look into how Muslim 'locals' strive to find a balance between Hong Kong's "worldly life" and the practice of Islam.

"Pure/True Islam" and "Cultural Islam"

In his ethnographic study on the century-long interactions of Dutch Calvinist missionaries in Indonesia, Webb Keane (2017) argues that the drive to purification is a modern concern that reaches into the history of religious reform. He contends that the soul was insisted to be a separate entity from the individual's physical embodiments through these reforms. Thus, in his findings, devotion to religion and sincerity of faith required missionaries' interlocutors to practice their agency by personalizing their prayers, from the heart—instead of invoking phrases that were inherited from ancestors. He further digs into such modern distinctions, and he looks at the attempts of "purification" by presenting the conflicts missionaries faced with their interlocutors when they attempted to purify and label local practices as "cultural" and "pagan religion"—in order to integrate Christian beliefs in the local "cultural" rituals for more sincere conversions while trying to get rid of pagan rituals to approach a "purer" form of culture. One may argue that this example is peculiar to a specific religious tradition that is derived from the historical developments in the West, and thus cannot be applied to Islam. However, in his work on genealogies of religion, Talal Asad (1993) presents how the problem with the concept of religion lies precisely in it being a modern product of a specific Western Christian history and the emergence of secularism (Ali 2018). Thus, Muslims, being exposed to globalized ideas and values, cannot separate themselves from the modern and ambiguous distinction between religion and culture. In my interactions with some Muslims that came to Hong Kong in a later part of their life, I was able to observe a similar process of questioning and locating these concepts in an

attempt to inspect the relation of their self to their religion. Looking at back my experiences as a Turkish citizen, I have also realized that this narrative of "cultural" and "pure" Islam concerns not only Muslims but the state as well, as the state faces the question of which Islam is the one that it should engage, in an attempt to contain religion (Özyürek 2007).

Even though the narration of a "pure Islam" has been more prevalent in modernity, this does not mean that the search for a form of Islam that is purified from "cultural deviances" has not been a concern in pre-modern times. In fact, the spread of Islam to wider territories and the adoption of Islam's message by people with different cultural ideas sparked such debates earlier, as previously mentioned. This distinction between "pure Islam" and cultural deviations, which may arguably be considered inherent in Islam itself, has caught the attention of many scholars that proposed different interpretations (Ali 2018). For instance, Ernest Gellner (1983) distinguished "folk Islam" from "scholarly Islam", whereas Geertz focused on the local manifestations of Islam. As Ali Muna (2018) argues, the anthropologist Abdul Hamid el-Zein's view of "islams" (1977) could serve as a critique directed to theologians and anthropologists whose starting points tend to be that a "well defined and pure" Islam exists as opposed to local folk "islams" which are judged for being less ordered and "contaminated" by magic and superstition. El-Zein argued that such juxtaposition of scholarly Islam versus folk Islam is unproductive in anthropological analysis. Instead, he believed, folk and scholarly (formal) theology should be seen as complementary as one exists in an institution while the other as literature (Ali 2018). Following the discussion, Talal Asad dismissed most of the answers and proposed that to do the anthropology of Islam, one had to start from the discursive tradition which relates itself to the

founding texts of the Quran and the *Hadith*[4], like Muslims do themselves (1986). Asad proposed that this tradition is not an alternative to modernity but rather comprises of discourses that link to a *past* when the practice's meaning and method was established; to a *present* that relates a practice to others in different social contexts; to a *future* as present believers strive to identify how the objective of a practice can be achieved both in the short and long term. Additionally, this discursive tradition does not bring about blind imitation or mimicry because what appears to be an 'imitation from the past' is what the practitioner considers *apt performance*, as the past is linked to the present practice, which is crucial to tradition but is not merely a repetition of an antique form (Ali 2018). Hence, following this interpretation, what determines whether a practice is Islamic or not is that it is regarded to be so by the Islamic discursive tradition and is taught to Muslims, regardless of whether they are ordinary folks or elite scholars, villagers or suburbanites (Ali 2018; Asad 1986). An example of how Muslims make sense of this discursive tradition is apparent in Saba Mahmood's ethnographic study of the Women's Mosque movement in Egypt in which mosque participants debate about how Quranic principles and classical texts are to be navigated in order to draw instructions for their lives (2011), an issue which I will return to later in this writing.

Having this understanding of Islam, Muna Ali argues that Muslims who immerse themselves in the narrative of "pure/true" versus "cultural" Islam in different time-space and social contexts are engaging this longstanding discursive tradition. She further states that seeing the different arguments that are part of this tradition as signs of a crisis of tradition would be conceptualizing

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[4] *Hadith*, an Arabic term meaning "talk" or "discourse", refers to what the majority of Muslims regard as to be the record of the words and actions of prophet Muhammad.

tradition as uncritical conformity. If argumentation is to be seen as the process of succeeding in persuasion and assuring the voluntary performance of a practice, instead of simply overrunning the other party's arguments, then "the centrality of argumentation to all discursive traditions will be evident" (2018, 110). Hence, according to Ali, heterogeneity instead of homogeneity should be perceived as an intrinsic trait of traditions, and that this heterogeneity should not correspond to "rampant incoherence".

Although I can see how both Ali and Asad point at the researcher's task of understanding the context and social circumstances that lead to the formulation and transformation of discursive practices and how its adherents strive to maintain its congruity and, although Asad's idea for an anthropology of Islam inspired and influenced the works of many scholars, I believe, as Maranci (2008) too argues, that the anthropology of Islam is not the theology of Islam. It is people's feelings, emotions, and ideas that anthropologists study. Hence, instead of starting with Islam's discursive tradition, as suggested by Asad, anthropologists should start with the experiences and feelings of Muslims and focus on how they make sense of Islam and how Islam shapes their relation to others, their environment, and their self. As Maranci puts it: "The main thing that Muslims share among themselves and others is certainly not Islam, but rather the fact that they are human beings" (2008, 7). Besides, it would be a mistake to think that everyone that identifies as a Muslim sees this discursive tradition as an authority as some people that I have interviewed in this study, instead of engaging themselves with this discursive tradition, doubted the authority and authenticity of the links of transmission in this discursive tradition, yet believed in Allah as they could only find meaning and purpose of life in that way. Again, what purpose does Asad's idea of an anthropology of Islam serve when people may identify with Islam and yet may be

indifferent towards the existence of this discursive tradition? If I am to adopt Asad's idea, then as an anthropologist, should I disclaim such a person's claims of being a Muslim? Or should I be concerned with how a person's relationship with Islam affects his/her subjective experience of the world? I hold the latter view.

Agnosticism with an Islamic Identity

Fardin[5] is a young (19M) Bangladeshi student studying in one of Hong Kong's top universities. At the time we sat for an interview, it was his third year living in Hong Kong. I knew him beforehand as we had done an internship in the same place and as he, from time to time, joined the *Jumma*[6] (Friday congregational prayers) that was held on campus every week. Before sitting for an interview, in my eyes, he was a Muslim that practiced some Islamic obligations such as going for *Jumma* and fasting. My assumption was based on my experience during my internship, which happened during the month of *Ramadan*[7], as he fasted every day and went for *Jumma* on Friday afternoons, and often invoked Islamic phrases such as *insha'Allah*[8], or *as-salamu alaykum*[9]. Therefore, I was quite shocked when he mentioned that he identified as being an agnostic at the start of our interview.

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[5] All informant names are pseudonyms.

[6] *Jumma* (Jumu'ah, Juma), "Friday", is the holiest day of the week on which the mandatory (for men) congregational prayers are conducted during the afternoon.

[7] *Ramadan*, considered a holy month in the Islamic calendar, is a time when Muslims worldwide practice fasting from sunrise to sunset, as part of the five pillars of Islam.

[8] *Insha'Allah*, meaning "if God wills" or "God willing" in Arabic, is commonly used to refer to events that one wishes to happen in the future.

[9] *As-salamu alaykum* is an Arabic greeting meaning "peace be upon you", and is a common religious greeting among Muslims and Arab Christians.

When I inquired about the practice of religion in his family and his community back in Bangladesh, Fardin described the differences among the generations of his parents and grandparents and those of him and his peers. To Fardin, he and his peers seemed religious in the exterior but followed a "liberal" way of living Islam which included drinking alcohol but not eating pork; on the other hand, religion in elder generations was more "ideological" and "superficial". When I asked him about why he thought so, he described how his parents would avoid 'why' questions such as "why did Allah make us this way" or "why do we have fever?" by providing answers like "God wills for it" or "it is God's decision and you can't hope to understand God this way". Fardin's other criticism his parents and relatives' "superficial faith" was the way they justified their practices by saying "this is what my parents followed, this is what I follow, this is what you should follow". In addition, the social pressure of internalizing his doubts and fear of being labeled as *kafir*[10] furthered the unease Fardin felt. To him, these answers were not satisfactory enough and if an ideology couldn't be questioned, "it was oppressive by nature." Although Fardin had this impression, interestingly, during his adolescence, this did not lead him into expunging his faith in God and the afterlife as he justified this by using the example of "Pascal's wager"—a philosophical argument which proposes that a rational human should bet for the existence of God and live accordingly because if it turns out to be false, one faces a finite loss (time and material in this life) whereas winning this bet would result in infinite gains (an endless afterlife in heaven) (Connor 2007).

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[10] *Kafir,* an Arabic term meaning "infidel", "rejector", "denier", or "nonbeliever", refers to a person who rejects God.

In one part of our interview, when I asked Fardin his opinion of a certain *hadith*, he mockingly presented his disbelief of the reliability of the *hadith* narrations as the transmission of the sayings of the Prophet had to be orally carried out from a generation to another for nearly 200 years after his death and be compiled in *hadith* collection books in the mid 9th century, even though he justified his faith and Islamic identity using Pascal's Wager argument. And this brings to my previous point, namely that Asad's idea of an anthropology of Islam, one that centers on the Islamic discursive tradition, cannot act as *the* guideline of doing *the* anthropology of Islam as the diversity of Muslim identities and Islamic views transcend the "authority" of the discursive tradition. The following joke illustrates this diversity: "When three Muslims discuss an Islamic law, they leave the room with four issued *fatwas*[11]."

Social Policing and 'Public Aspects of Islam'

Fardin also described how the overall social pressure on practicing religion in his community was another factor that distressed him. While describing this pressure, Fardin was criticizing how this "social policing" was concerned with only some of the aspects of Islam, while other aspects were out of question. One could not escape from the expectation of fulfilling certain practices (that had more communal traits) such as fasting and *jumma*; while obligations such as the five daily prayers were considered to be "private" and therefore fell out of the scope of the community's "internal policing". Fardin touched further upon 'private' aspects of one's practice of Islam:

> When you are out in the street as a woman, 9 times out of 10, a random guy is going to come and say, 'why aren't you wearing a burqa?', 'why are you showing skin?', 'why are

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[11] *Fatwa* is a non-binding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified jurist, usually in response to a question posed.

you like this?'. But they will never come to you to ask what you think of Allah, what you think of religion, what you think of a specific verse or a *Hadith*. These questions are considered as private, so there is less policing involved."

In Fardin's opinion, this social pressure led to his generation's "cherry-picking" practices which were convenient for them. This made him question the ambiguity of the concept of *iman* (faith):

Let's say that you have a circle of rules and you follow them when it is convenient. But when it is not convenient for you, you don't follow them. Does this mean these are your actual principles?

Fardin's reflection on certain incidents in his earlier life in Bangladesh provides a thought-provoking example that clarifies why numerous traditional anthropologists' accounts of the affinity between 'enculturation' and 'socialization' fail to explain many scenarios like this one. A popular view among many anthropologists is that through socialization, which refers to influences such as family, neighbors, training and teaching methods of language, myths, taboos, etc., the individual becomes part of a culture and immersed in the expected behavioral patterns, and thus gets 'encultured' into a certain way of perceiving the world. As an example, Gladwin (1961) argues for an apparent coherence among the concepts of 'socialization' and 'enculturation'. Beals (1953) uses the concepts cultural acquisition and enculturation non-distinctively. However, as Fardin narrates, it was precisely socialization via certain internal moral policing that hindered Fardin from embodying and adopting the expected cultural behaviors and moral beliefs of his society. Since the human condition allows one to reflect on one's past and take an ethical position by evaluating the morality of previous actions, not every attempt at socialization results in complying with cultural norms. The synergy and the potential tensions between agency and structure are evident in Michel Foucault's investigation of "the

ethical self" where he looks into the diverse ways in which power and structure get subjectified according to the individual's ethical position (2012). In this example, what determines Fardin's ethical position is rather interesting as he explains his exposure to the internet world which helped him equip the moral lens he looks at the world today. Thus, Fardin refuses to identify with the ways of upholding morality by some people in his previous environment.

Secularization via the Internet

Fardin's antipathy of an enforced Islam did not make him an agnostic until a life-changing point in his life, which he described as being exposed to the internet. It was a turning point in his religious life as he came across what he considered as "left-wing values". Fardin's interpretation of "left-wing values" was progressive values and ideas which he saw as opposing to Islamic doctrines:

> A lot of us are now adopting Western values in third-world countries like Bangladesh. If you are a true Muslim and follow all doctrines in the Quran and the Hadith, it is impossible for you to be left-wing. … Because you don't accept LGBTQ, gender equality, premarital sex, or abortion. Today, in our current generation, it is generally looked down upon if you are a very ideological person. Everyone is expected to be a centrist, to not hold too strong of a view — unless it is decided by the crowd. Otherwise, you will be alienated from the group and be an outcast.

The internet introduced him to many "liberal bubbles" where he chatted with people and discovered many so-called progressive discourses which he had not heard of in his life interactions in his community. Fardin mentioned how meeting people from the West showed him how different people could be and how Islam is viewed differently from people outside Bangladesh. This echoes with studies looking into the association between individual religiosity and internet usage that present a negative correlation between the two (Nadeem, Mohammad,

Buzdar, Shakir, and Naseer 2019; Armfield, and Holbert 2003). It is tempting to describe the secularization of the internet user by invoking how globalization is an ultimate product of the spread of internet and how the ease of access to different online discourses provides one with the ability to pick and choose from the cultural supermarket (Mathews 2000) and construct an identity accordingly. However, I believe Foucault's usage of the concept 'discourse' (1978) would help to perceive the online world not merely as a supermarket or a melting pot of ideas, beliefs, and identities, but also a political arena in which "the subject is produced within discourse. This subject of discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be subjected to discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces." (Hall 1997, 55). The following words of Fardin describe the ways in which he was involved with secularist discourses and his position towards Islamic ones online:

> You research about things, you come across a white person's YouTube channel and watch his videos and see that his values are different from yours. You try to see how Islam is actually viewed from people who are not Bangladeshi. When you think about these things, you join random groups in Facebook and get exposed to even more different types of people. And then you start talking with them. … I would say (online Muslim groups) are mindless to me because they don't really focus on discussions. A person shares a post about an Islamic quote or something like that and the other person just 'likes' it and that's it. Discourse isn't prioritized.

Eric Chalfant, in his investigation of deconversion narratives on the internet, narrates how the meaning inscribed in being a deconverted atheist is not only based on the language used in deconversion narratives to distinguish religion from atheism, but also on the language that is borrowed from religion by atheism (2011, 34). Hence, we see that what "the other" people tell about Islam and what Muslims say about Islam in online settings do not belong to independent domains where one is not influenced by the other. Instead, the construction of secular

subjectivity emerging from Fardin's observations online points toward the intricacy and complexity of (his agnostic) identity formation. Discourses produce a place for the subject from where its particular knowledge and meaning make most sense (Hall 1977, 56). So, the way Fardin must locate himself in such a position, from which the discourse makes most sense, turns him into a subject of the discourse(s)'s meanings, power, and regulation. Thus, the discursive negotiations between Islam and secularism, as in Fardin's online experience, are crucial in understanding his subjectivity and position in reference to the Muslims' discourse on the internet. It is Fardin's subjectivation of and position towards such different online discourses that shape his identity today. Hence, we are once again reminded about how impactful discourses can be on the subject's self as he/she has to position him/herself in regards to discourse. And it is precisely by having to adopt a certain position in regard to a discourse that one also participates in that discourse. In this case, the online discourses that Fardin experienced were re-produced as he was explaining in what ways online arguments led him to his doubts today and as he was creating a hierarchy among the different discourses depending on how convincing they were to him.

What I have presented, of course, does not imply that the online space is necessarily dominantly secular—especially if we take into account how internet suggestions (advertisements, video/website recommendations, search results, etc.) today are meticulously engineered to match our identity and desires. In fact, most of the people that I have interacted with have mentioned certain online sources (YouTube most often) which acted as a source of Islamic knowledge and helped them in maintaining a sincere *iman* (faith) when they faced certain challenges in real life. An example I observed took place when a group of Central Asian students gathered to watch and

discuss certain Islamic sermon videos posted online. In that instance, Akhat, a Kazakh university student, lamented about how the spiritual satisfaction he received from watching the videos would often diminish when he returned to his ordinary life. This reminds me of the work of anthropologist Charles Hirschkind concerning how, during his time of fieldwork, cassette sermons had both transformed the political geography of the Middle East and served as an instrument of ethical self-improvement that aimed for pious living (2006). And today, more media tools have been incorporated, allowing Muslims to treat certain online settings not only as a tool for ethical self-transformation but also as an opportunity of engagement (both with the content and other viewers) via written comments and other means of expression (Hirschkind 2012).

The Modern Construction of Belief

After deciding to study in Hong Kong, a decision primarily motivated by scholarships, Fardin realized that the social atmosphere of Hong Kong was very different from that of Bangladesh. According to him, his new life in Hong Kong consisted of liberty derived from Hong Kongers' indifference towards what other people do.

> As someone who doesn't speak Chinese, I am extremely isolated from the conversations of locals. So, the life I have in Hong Kong is definitely different from that I had in Bangladesh. But more than what Hong Kong life actually is, it has a lot more to do with my position as a foreigner who could not integrate into the Hong Kong culture. So, you can call it liberty— you can call it free of not being judged. You can also call it indifference. No one really cares what you do. The social pressure is only when I choose it to be.

What Fardin meant was that the social pressure of feeling obliged to practice his religion depended on the social circle he chose to be in. He talked about how he felt compelled to think

deeply in terms of religion when he joined the events of a Christian missionary student group in his university, or when he decided to go to *jumma* on Fridays. It was interesting to hear that he, from time to time, decided to join the *jumma* prayers on campus even though he enjoyed the freedom of not being expected to be religious. He justified this by talking about how going to the Friday prayers was a way of socializing and having a bond that connected him and the others:

> Although I was self-isolating in my first year in university, I mostly went to Friday prayers so that I would meet with others and be talkative with them. So, for me, Islam was like a common bond that connected me. I only started drinking alcohol and eating pork in my third-year. Back then, Islam and the community itself was a way for me to feel like I have someone in a world that is indifferent towards me. Whereas locals don't really care about what I do or don't do, I had a community that cared. I would say that if a person is lonely, they would cling to religion as a way of relief and as a way of getting past their daily struggles. Eventually, I realized that in this community, you are only part of it when you are also part of that religion. If you weren't religious, that community will try to turn you into a religious person. I started to view friendships in these communities as very superficial. If I fuck up once, then that thing (relationship) is gone. So why bother clinging on something that is so formal?

This reminds me of Ralph Coury's work, which brings together a collection of excerpts from modern Arab writers whose position towards Islam challenges some of the traditional aspects of Islam. While some of the writers dismiss most elements of Islam and call it "superstitious", others try to find a rationalist basis to their faith by linking it with modern science (2018). And this again presents how diverse adherents of Islam could be and how complex people's identifications with Islam can become, as one faces modern challenges.

Fardin's relationship with Islam and the Muslim community is certainly interesting and opaque. He is not fond of the religious practice of his parents as he found it too "cultural" and lacking any personal bond with Allah. According to his narrative, the idea of having a personal

relationship with God was something that he was only exposed to once he came to Hong Kong—and it was through Christianity. Yet, for him, Islam still acted as a communal convention even though, when he came to Hong Kong, he was mostly "freed" from the societal pressure he faced back home. Eventually, the communal focus on people's religiosity in the Muslim community in Hong Kong led him to ditch his connection to the community and Islam as a religion, to currently identify as an agnostic. However, from my impression of him, I don't think Fardin could be considered as an agnostic that chooses to be secular as a result of epistemological doubting, so much as an agnostic who has, to a certain extent, bits of Islamic identity that have corroded due to both emotional and rational conflicts he has had throughout his life. I was able to observe this in our conversations in which he would invoke the complementary phrase that Muslims attach to the Prophet's name: *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* (may Allah honor him and grant him peace)—whenever he mentioned the name of Prophet Muhammad. My other observation of this occurred after our interview, while we were sitting by the railway stop when he greeted another Bangladeshi student by saying "Assalamu alaykum Sister."

I believe the apparently "contradictory" aspects of Fardin's self and identity should not be seen as a discrepancy but rather as deriving from our lack of understanding of faith due to the modern use of the word "religion". Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his classical work, argues that practitioners of any faith do not regard what they do in the domains of religion as 'religion'. Instead, he presents a historical study showing how the word 'religion' is a modern product of identity, politics, and apologetics (1963). So, the concept of religion or religions is a modern invention, which the West has introduced to the rest of the world to think of themselves as members of an exclusive society against others. Such an understanding did not exist in prior

times as the word religion, in the sense that we understand it today, occurred neither in the early

scriptures nor within the European traditions. It was only after the theological disputes during the

Enlightenment period in Europe that the notion of religion as a system of doctrines was

effectively formed. The word "religion" not only separated the secular from the "religious" but

also helped to mark the otherness of a group of people from the rest of the world who believed in

'other religions'.

Smith also reveals how the meaning of the word "to believe" has changed so dramatically in the

past three centuries "that they wreak profound havoc in our ability to understand our own

historical tradition and the religious faith of others" (Good 1993, 15). As an example, Good

provides anthropologist Mary Steedly's account of her experience with the Karobatak people in

Sumatra by telling how at the beginning of her fieldwork she was often asked a question that she

understood to mean "do you believe in spirits?". Such scenarios, according to Good, are

embarrassing questions for anthropologists to answer since she personally did not, but respected

and wanted to learn about the villagers' understanding. After some months, Steedly came to

discover that her questioners were asking "Do you trust spirits? Do you believe what they say?

Do you maintain a relationship with them?" "Any sensible person believes in their existence; that

isn't even a meaningful question. The real question is how one chooses to relate to them" (Good

1993, 15).

Smith (1977, 44), having presented the intriguing genealogy of the word, sums up his argument

about the change of the religious meaning of "belief" by the following:

> The affirmation "I believe in God" used to mean: "Given the reality of God as the fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to Him my heart and soul. I commitedly opt to live in loyalty to Him. I offer my life to be judged by Him trusting His mercy." Today the statement may be taken by some as meaning : "Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is 'yes'. I judge God to be existent."

Given Good's account and how the words "to believe" and "religion" have taken a very secular form in contemporary times, I suppose the chaotic situation of Human's search for meaning and coherence today can be a result of our misunderstanding of such concepts and our misrepresentation of others that do establish a relationship with the divine. Analyzing how we perceive the meaning of "belief" in the modern world, we come to realize how, many possessors of life, stand in a relativist position, gaze long into the abyss, and experience existential crisis by looking at and experiencing the world in an agnostic lens in which everyone's belief is for themselves and "to believe" is to merely place your bet on a *possibility,* or to adopt a certain identity that marks one's social status, or to seek "spiritual comfort", or to simply cling on a "hope" that soothes one's anxiety of dying. It is the language equipped by most academics, modern discourses of secularity, media representation and many other aspects of the human condition today that hinders us from attempting to see from the eyes of a person of faith or an adherent of a cumulative tradition. The modern dichotomies of belief/disbelief and religion/secular deconstruct the varieties of "faith", overlooks the dynamic position and relationship of an adherent to the divine, and perceives cumulative tradition as simply a set of rigid doctrines.

I consider Human's fall into the pit of modernity as a reason for possibly misunderstanding Fardin's account as solely a person contradicting himself. Instead, I presume it is the condition of the modern human that both puts Fardin in a position where he goes back and forth between the mentioned "dichotomies"—thus adopting an identity that claims to be agnostic yet carries so many Islamic traits—and us in the situation of failing to describe or comprehend Fardin's dynamic relationship with his faith owing to the eroded vocabulary that we are equipped with.

Freedom, Agency, and Ethics

Salman is an international student from Pakistan (22M), who also happens to be Fardin's friend from the same university. When I was talking with Fardin, he described Salman as a fervent Muslim who was not a "centrist" and who stuck to his ideas and practices regardless of the social context he was in. Therefore, according to Fardin, Salman was left out from many social circles. Salman has grown up in, what he considers, a religious family. However, he has "truly" started being aware of his religion and started doing all the obligatory Islamic practices during his time in high school when he had no preparation for his exams and therefore decided to read about religion in his stressful times. When he realized that sticking to Islam resulted in everything being sorted out in his favor, he regarded fulfilling Islamic obligations as something of a great significance: "realizing its (Islamic prayers') importance, I don't do it for the culture, I do it because it is important."

After Salman invoked the word "culture", I was curious about what he would think about concepts of "cultural" and "true" Muslim. He mentioned that he had never heard of the terms

before. However, one thing he stressed was how people in Pakistan prioritized "looking Muslim", instead of "being Muslim".

> They think looking Muslim is more important than being Muslim. So for that society, if you have a long beard, and if you don't dress Western, they will regard you as a good Muslim, even though you may be a smuggler. So, they get a bit shocked when they see that I am a religious person, even though I may not look like one. (…) To be honest, in Pakistan people are far from being Muslims. We have the most corrupt people in the world. People don't do jobs in banks because interest is involved, but then they don't give taxes as well—which is technically stealing from the government and therefore is *haram*. This is hypocrisy. Most people practice a 'selective religion'. They take the things which they like and not believe in things that they don't like.

Hence, for Salman, being a Muslim required one to internalize Islam as a whole, instead of picking certain outward practices which were essential in being considered as a good Muslim in his community in Pakistan. This argument is a similar to Fardin's criticism of his parents' practice of Islam as they "did not have a rational understanding of it" but "did it for the culture and tradition". Where Fardin and Salman's ideas differed is whether pressuring a person regarding his/her religious obligations was justifiable. While Fardin labeled pressure to practice religion as 'oppressive', 'ideological', and 'cultural', Salman thought that, to a certain extent, it was a duty that he had to follow.

> I think being in a Muslim society is better (compared to being in a secular one) because at least the person would not commit sins when he is in an Islamic community. But the thing is, conservatism may lead to extremism—thinking that what we do is correct while what other understandings are false. For me, there is no such thing as conservatism. You either practice or you don't. And if you choose to practice, it is your duty to encourage others and force your kids.

At this point, I would like to concentrate more on Salman's comments, which unfold a different way of perceiving power—an understanding that opposes both Fardin's as well as the liberal

perception of agency. Saba Mahmood, in her ethnography scrutinizing the women's piety movements in Egypt in 1995, criticizes the feminist scholarship for assuming that women who take part in such movements are resisting the patriarchal system that they are in. Instead, she argues that what may seem as docility, passivity, and subordination from a progressivist point of view, may in fact be a form of agency that can only be understood from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment (2011). After taking part in the sermons and lectures in which the participants of the movement discussed various topics such as veiling, forcing oneself to weep during prayer, or avoiding mixed settings, Mahmood comes to realize that for these women ritual is both an ethical mean and an end because for them rituals are meant to please God by shaping one's self. Mahmood summarizes her point with the following:

> The mosque movements did not regard authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained the individual. Rather, they viewed socially prescribed forms of conduct as potentialities, the 'scaffolding,' if you will, through which the self is realized. It is precisely this self-willed obedience to religiously prescribed social conventions—what is often criticized as blind and uncritical emulation— that elicits the critique that such movements only serve to reproduce the exiting patriarchal order and to prevent women from distinguishing their 'own desires and aspirations' from those that are 'socially dictated'. (2011, 148)

Likewise, I presume Salman's comments can be read this way as he believed that pressure on religiosity can be justifiable if it leads one to cultivate certain Islamic ethics. In other words, Salman did not understand "social pressure" in the same way as Fardin did. For Salman, what may seem as 'pressure' or a 'constrain' to one's freedom from a liberal perspective is actually an opportunity for the believer to internalize and embody piety. Also, his critique of those that "look Muslim" instead of "being Muslim" reflects how his criticism is actually towards these people's inability to perceive such rituals as a means to achieve a certain internalized *habitus* in one's strive towards God's path—instead of merely as an end in itself. To further elaborate, when Salman

accused of hypocrisy people that avoided working in banks due to the involvement of interest (which is prohibited in Islam) but who did not pay taxes, he castigated them for not realizing that avoiding interest is not only an end in itself but also a means in internalizing God's ruling on a believer's economic life—which they failed to do by not paying taxes (and thus stealing). Rather, according to Salman, "being Muslim" would have required the individual to avoid being involved in interest but also cultivate the Islamic virtues of economic life that would prevent the person from tax evasion.

Interestingly, throughout the conversations that I have had with various practicing Muslims, the idea of achieving a certain internalized *habitus* and virtues appeared frequently as they mentioned various techniques of the self that allowed them to keep themselves in check with piety despite the worldly flow of life they shared in Hong Kong. For instance, Gurban, a university student from Turkmenistan, shared his daily habit of filling a table that inquired about various practices he spent a proportion of his day on—such as the number of Quran pages read, whether he fulfilled a voluntary fast, the prayers he did, the number of pages he read from an Islamic book, etc. Such practices surely echo with Foucault's investigation of how power gets "productively" subjectivized in the cultivation of self-control and discipline, and his analysis of Greco-Roman culture of (diary-like) self-writing via personal notebooks (1997).

Hence, by looking at the cases of Fardin and Salman, one can see that there can be diverse ways of subjectivizing social pressure on religiosity. I believe Salman's account is revealing in three major ways. First, it shows how there can be other perceptions and meanings inscribed in concepts

such as 'agency' and 'freedom' in contrast to the liberal discourse that fills these concepts with a certain normative understanding, assumed to be universal, before labeling certain acts as 'subordination' and 'oppression'. Second, it takes us back to the tradition surrounding Aristotelian ethics which connects the means and ends of our actions in the way of cultivating certain virtues to *flourish* as a mortal being (Ameriks and Clarke 2000). This concept resonates with many other cumulative traditions, like that of Islam, in striving in the way of God. And lastly, it portrays the spectrum of Muslims and their practice and understanding of Islam.

As a side note, I would like to mention that not everyone that I talked to was motivated by cultivating and internalizing certain virtues when they performed certain external Islamic acts and obligations. As an example, Amira, an Indian Muslim in her mid-twenties, narrated about the struggles she faced, time to time throughout her life, when wearing the *hijab*[12]—after her mother convinced her about the Islamic reasoning inherent in the practice. At some point earlier in her life, she felt like an outsider among her peers. And in her work life today, in a luxurious fashion company, she sometimes questioned whether the *hijab* might not make her look pretty. Yet, she was motivated by wanting to break the stereotype of "muslim women being oppressed" through being a veiled Muslim woman who worked for a prestigious fashion company. Thus, one can say that Amira's motivations differed from those who prioritized the flourishing of certain virtues as she overcame her struggles through the arguments her mother provided concerning the Islamic reasoning behind veiling and by having a cause that was related to her public identity.

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[12] A *hijab* is a veil worn by some Muslim woman which usually covers the hair and the chest. It is associated with Islamic standards of modesty and is worn in the presence of any male outside the individual's immediate family.

A Religiosity Inattentive to Pressure

Like Fardin, Salman's primary motivation in choosing to study in Hong Kong was scholarships. Salman, having visited Singapore beforehand, had a rough idea about the social atmosphere he would face in Hong Kong—but to him, being in a non-Islamic environment was not an issue for he believed that as long as one knows what is right and wrong, it should not be difficult for one to practice his/her religion and he believed that if a person's motivation for practicing Islam was merely based on the encouragement of others, that person was "doing it for the culture".

In his student life in Hong Kong, Salman's social circle consisted of a couple of South Asian friends that also lived in his dormitory hall. In his circle, Salman considered himself to be the only religious person. According to his observations, most people change once they come to Hong Kong and are freed from their previous social ties as they could not drink or eat pork in a conservative society like Pakistan. When I asked about why they chose not to be religious, Salman provided several reasons.

> I think things like praying for them is something 'too holy', but in fact it is not. It is the thing where religion starts. They think such practices are a bit backward, like modernism means to hold back from religion. (…) And many of them haven't read enough about religion. The 'why' questions in religion have not been emphasized enough. Like 'why do we pray', or 'why do we do all these stuff'… these questions have to be answered.

Regarding his religious life in Hong Kong, Salman pointed out how he did not face any difficulty in his practices as he observed that no one would interfere when he wanted to practice his religion. As an example, he described how he would always carry a prayer mat in his bag and

how he usually prayed in spots which would not affect the life of others. When I asked about situations in which he had to deal with progressive values adopted in the society that he is in, he narrated a recent experience.

> Right now, I am doing a group project. And one of my group mates is an LGBTQ member of her community. I prefer not to talk about it because it will create an argument or something. But knowing that I am a practicing Muslim, she asked me about my opinion. And my reply was like 'I certainly can't support the idea (given my beliefs), but I am also against discrimination'. Just like that, if a person is doing a sin, I still have to treat that person like a normal human being. It is God that will judge.

Thus, to Salman, once a Muslim successfully internalizes and embodies Islamic ideas and practices, s/he should not be facing any difficulty living a religious life in any social circumstance. His position towards Islam's communal aspect contrasts to that of Fardin, for whom Islam was significant in creating social bonds which aided in having a sense of belonging in a certain part of his life in Hong Kong. Salman, on the other hand, is able to divorce external social factors from his own pious self and believes having a firm understanding of Islam, which can satisfactorily answer 'why' questions, would suffice in leading to being a good Muslim that fits any society.

Piety through Others

Shahid (19M) and Nabeeh (25M) are both born and raised in Hong Kong and are a part of Hong Kong's Bangladeshi community. Both of them have grown in what they refer to as a religious setting and they both consider themselves as practicing and religious Muslims. Shahid is a university student who has received his prior education in an international and a Catholic school. To him, religion became meaningful once he was in high school where an Indian Hindu friend of

his, who was interested in religions, asked Shahid about his religion—which led Shahid to feel obliged to know more about Islam himself. On the other hand, Nabeeh works in an NGO and has studied in schools where South Asian ethnic minorities were the majority. Like Shahid, Nabeeh too became a devout Muslim in his high school times when he found out that the Arabic verses that he had memorized indeed had meanings attached to them—which urged him to grab and read an English translation of the Quran. Both Shahid and Nabeeh stated that they belonged to the Bangladeshi community in Hong Kong and their social circle mostly consisted of people from their community. This made me wonder if the Bangladeshi community that they grew up in was similar to what Fardin had described. In other words, how much could the Bangladeshi community in Hong Kong differ from the types of communities in Bangladesh which Fardin was a part of and criticized?

According to both of their narratives, the Bangladeshi community that Shahid and Nabeeh were in consisted not only of a spectrum of Muslim lives but included Hindu families as well. Hence, although their families were a major source in their Islamic upbringing, the community as a whole did not center on Islamic rituals and beliefs. Islam acted as a means of bringing people together—but religion itself was not a part of their communal activities as "it was mostly about food and gathering". When I had asked about whether one would face strong reactions in the community if one committed sins such as pursuing premarital relationships or drinking alcohol, Shahid and Nabeeh had differing opinions. While Shahid believed that due to the diversity in the community, people "tolerated" different opinions and lifestyles, Nabeeh believed that, to a certain extent, such behavior would be frowned upon but there would not be any sort of backlash.

When it came to how these individuals made sense of being in a Muslim community, Shahid thought that being in a Muslim community was a way for him to "keep himself in check". He described how going to Malaysia for a holiday, where everyone followed the same Islamic practices, made it easier for him and his family to follow their religious duties as well. In fact, he considered this as an important point in time that made his family more conscious of their religion and therefore pushed them to become more fervent in their Islamic practices. Nabeeh too believed in the significance of sticking to a Muslim community where one can "get rid of his materialistic tendencies that Hong Kong brings". As a different approach, Nabeeh joined the Islamic events held by the Muslim youth groups in Hong Kong as he thought that the Bangladeshi community did not provide any religious motivation, and was more "cultural". In contrast to Salman's lack of interest in looking for Islamic circles, Shahid and Nabeeh saw it as a necessary part of their Islamic life which prevented them from straying away from religion and minimizing their temptations which, otherwise, may result in committing sins—given the freedom in Hong Kong.

Nabeeh and his family visited Bangladesh once in two years, whereas Shahid has visited Bangladesh only a couple of times. When I asked Nabeeh what he thought of the concept "cultural Islam", he associated it with practices that had non-Islamic traits in them but were still practiced by Muslims. An example he gave was the weddings he observed in Bangladesh. He described how weddings consisted of singing, dancing, partying, bringing DJs, and other rituals that were inherited from Hindu wedding traditions. So, he believed that, as a Muslim one would not be able to see that such things were wrong once they were intertwined with the community

practices. Hence, Nabeeh related the concept "cultural Islam" more to introducing cultural practices into Islam, rather than Islamic practices becoming a part of local traditions. In Nabeeh's conceptualization of the term, the vector of flow from "religion" to "culture", as thought by Fardin, was reversed—which illustrates the possible different interpretations Muslims had of the concept and how the domain of "purification" could include both religion and culture as separate fields.

Chinese Ethnic Classification and Islam

Aysha is a local Chinese Hong Konger who has converted to Islam during her youth in the 1990s. She has served in one of the mosques for quite a long time before working as a staff member in a university in Hong Kong. Although she has always been in Hong Kong and has not had the disorienting experience that the aforementioned Muslims had, her sharing about the Hong Kong Chinese Muslim community reveals much about the relationship between Islam as an ingredient of personal identity and Islam as a form of life centered on Islamic obligations with the purpose of obeying and submitting to God.

Before getting to Aysha's comments, it is crucial to have an idea of the distinct character of the Chinese Muslim community in comparison to the wider Muslim community in Hong Kong. As was previously mentioned, Chinese Muslims outnumber South Asian Muslims in Hong Kong. However, during my field visits to mosques and Islamic events, I was surprised to see that there were very few Chinese faces visible in Muslim gatherings, be it in *Jumma* prayers, seminars, or youth events. The only place where I was able to observe a dominant presence of Chinese

Muslims was at the Halal canteen located in a building complex in Wan Chai, which also hosted a kindergarten, a mosque, the Islamic Union of Hong Kong headquarters, and the office of the Islamic Trust. And most of the Chinese Muslims that spent time in this canteen, according to my observations, did not have many visual clues that hinted at their Islamic background and made them indistinguishable from most other Chinese Hong Kongers "outside". Hence, my experience raised many questions regarding why Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong chose to group themselves in this way and whether they intended to form a certain Islamic identity that is based on 'Chinese' traits—isolated from other ethnic groups.

When I inquired with Aysha about the potential reasons for the lack of participation of the Chinese community in public religious settings and for the unequal age distribution of Chinese Muslims that regularly visit the mosque (that is, elder Chinese Muslims outnumbering younger ones), she provided me with the following explanation regarding Hui Muslims and their sense of Islamic identity:

> The elders, their sense of Islamic identity is still stronger than those that came later. I think it is more in their roots. Remember, they were Hui. And Hui people, they may not know a lot about Islam, but this 'Hui'ness means a lot to them (once they leave Mainland to settle in Hong Kong). So, since many Islamic performances are embedded in their identity, they still continue doing some of the practices. That is why you can see elders in the mosque but not youngsters. For young people, once they are in Hong Kong, their 'Hui'ness becomes diluted. Because in Hong Kong we don't distinguish. We are all Chinese. But in Mainland China, 'Hui' is in your identity! In your passport! So you are always conscious that you are Hui, and you are different from Han. But, there is no such separation in Hong Kong.

Another Chinese Muslim with a 'Hui' background also mentioned a similar experience in her social circle—her Islamic identity never came to the fore, except in certain scenarios.

> So the thing about Chinese Muslims, because we are Chinese, we can just blend in with the mainstream society. In my personal case, people wouldn't really know that I am a Muslim unless they see my surname and be like: 'Oh, that's a very rare surname. Where are you from then?'. In that case I will just tell them. Also, when I go out with my colleagues to have lunch and propose to go somewhere vegetarian they sometimes ask me the reason. In that case I will just mention my identity. So, it more up to us to offer the information and it is very possible to blend in.

This interesting account reflects the questionable and obscure ethnic-classification project of the Chinese Communist Party. Thomas S. Mullaney, in his book concerning the ethnic classification in modern China (2011), investigates the "scientific" methods used by the party officials to somehow reduce more than 400 non-Han ethnic minorities to 55 while taking Stalinist nationality criteria as a point of reference. The Hui ethnic-minority group was one of the first minorities to be identified. In his work, Dru C. Gladney explores the cultural politics and identity in contemporary Chinese societies and, through three-years of anthropological fieldwork in various parts of China, provides examples of divergent expressions of the Hui identity (1998). Gladney narrates how the Hui trace their roots to Arab and Persian traders during the Tang period and are more culturally and linguistically integrated with the local (Han) communities, compared to other Chinese Muslims. Gladney also argues that although Islam's 'foreignness' stems from the fact that it developed outside China, the differentiation of Hui from Han does not depend too much on religious distinctions but on certain customs. Two such customs are the refusal to eat pork, and tracing one's descent from original Muslim immigrants (1996). Aysha's comments resonated with Gladney's argument as she, in her office, presented me the genealogical record of a 'Hui' Chinese Muslim Hong Konger, an old lady who was originally from Beijing.

> I think these records are something particular to Chinese Muslim families in Hong Kong, they have their genealogy record. I guess this is quite special because I never heard such

a thing from my non-Muslim friends. And it is not a small effort to compile all these, because this (points at the records) traces the auntie's family to 15th century, the Ming dynasty

Aysha, on another occasion, also mentioned that the reasons some Chinese Muslims start coming to the mosque later in their life is to secure a place in the Muslim cemetery since the cemetery had limited space in a place like Hong Kong which required the Muslim community to "endorse" one's Islamic identity by reference from others. I believe this may partly explain the scenario I faced in *Fig.1* in which most of the gravestones included Chinese characters, although the presence of the Chinese in Hong Kong's Muslim community was not so apparent. Gladney's observation that avoiding pork was also a significant differentiation of Hui from Han also echoed with some of Aysha's words.

> You know, Chinese Muslims, although not all, may not know-or care to know- what Islam is about. But they are very particular about the diet. They are very particular about not eating pork. They are very attached to it. That is, they strictly follow the Muslim diet rule. No pork, no wine. So, for this reason they come to the mosque canteen.

Aysha's long involvement in Hong Kong's Muslim community and her observation of Hong Kong's Chinese Muslims concur with Gladney's findings concerning some of the characteristics of the Hui community, although both observations are done in quite different contexts and time periods. On the one hand, Gladney looks into Hui people in Mainland China, where there is a clear emphasis on ethnic classification; on the other hand, Aysha speaks of Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong, where citizenship is not based on an ethnic identity but civic identity. So, even though a Chinese non-practicing Muslim's choice of avoiding pork and alcohol no more creates levels of 'Chineseness' once s/he arrives in Hong Kong, the fact that they may still hold on to such practices unveils the intricate formation of an identity. It is suchlike scenarios that refute the

liberal perceptions of identity construction—which assume that one can and must *freely* choose the traits that mark and form one's identity—when, in reality, the *becoming* of the person involves the complex combination of embodied habits, family history, the environment of upbringing, identity politics, the ethical formation of the self, gender roles, and many other aspects which anthropologists bring into the light by narrowing their focus more on the individuals. João Biehl's work concerning the zones of social abandonment Brazil's big cities is an example of such approaches because it centers on the life of an increasingly paralyzed young girl whose story helps Biehl trace the convoluted network of state, medicine, economy, and family (2013). This is not to take a Freudian position that presents a completely individualized framework of the self, as proposed by his psychoanalytic theory of personality and *the unconscious* (Freud 2003), which disregards many cultural structures. This is also not to argue for an individual-culture dichotomy in which a person either conforms to the cultural norms or becomes *deviant* as a result of a conflict between one's personality and the cultural expectations (Benedict 1959). Instead, it is to adopt a perspective that neither disregards individual factors in the formation of the self nor perceives culture as a rigid structure. It is via this lens that one should see through and look into the lives of individuals when trying to formulate ideas concerning a culture that they may commonly share. In other words, instead of a top-down approach, a bottom-up method of investigation would prevent generalizations and provide room for personal stories that may at times contradict or conform to certain cultural customs. Hence, to further recognize the complicated identity and self-formation of Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong, it is vital to explore the mosaic lives of individuals. One such person is Layla.

Oriental Orientalism

Layla is a young Chinese lady whose great grandfather was a leading figure in the Chinese

Muslim community of Hong Kong. Since Layla's family's roots go back to Guangzhou, she

would consider her family as 'Hui'. Her paternal side of the family has been Muslims for many

generations, while her mother is a revert (Muslims usually prefer using the word 'revert' instead

of 'convert' as they believe each individual is initially born a Muslim prior to external influences

later on in their lives). Layla was born in Hong Kong and has studied in elite international

schools which then led her to finish her undergraduate studies in a rather prestigious university in

the UK. She currently works in a private company in Hong Kong. So, it could be said that her

upper socioeconomic upbringing has exposed her to a diverse environment. After her return to

Hong Kong, although most of her Muslim contacts used to be Chinese, she recently has started

joining Muslim youth groups and has been more in touch with the Pakistani community ever

since. However, Layla believes that she does not fraternize with them as she considers them

"quite distinct". When I inquired about what she meant by this, she replied:

> I am going to talk in very general terms, and this is just my interpretation; but, most of
> the Pakistani community that you see in Hong Kong nowadays, they come to Hong Kong
> from the villages in Pakistan, in like the 1990s. And they kind of brought their village to
> Hong Kong. They just stayed in their own circles. So, while the rest of Pakistan
> progressed in the last 40 years, they (the ones that came to Hong Kong) maintained that
> village mentality from the 1960s. And that is who you see in Hong Kong right now.
> Okay… I don't want to use the word 'backward', but then... but I think that's what I am
> trying to say.

Layla's comments concerning the Pakistani Muslims were quite a shock to me, although I was

aware of some of the complaints my South Asian friends had mentioned concerning the everyday

racism they face in Hong Kong. This not only shows how the racism towards certain ethnic

minorities in Hong Kong is based more on ethnic stereotypes than religious ones (O'Connor

2012), as Layla was speaking of Muslims that she may share the same religious space with, but it also presents an instance of what Gladney identifies as "oriental Orientalism" (2004, 77). According to Edward Said, Orientalism is an integral part of the European culture which, through means of literature, language, art, and other forms of sophisticated representation, constructs stereotypical images of the East, i.e. the Orient (1978). It is a crucial aspect of European identity as Orientalism both speaks for the Orient and decides what the Orient is and is not, which also becomes a way of marking what one *is*—as opposed to what the 'other' does. However, Turner states that globalization makes it difficult to speak of oriental and occidental identities as binary separates, as the East/West dichotomy may lead to many limitations that may fail to explain scenarios in multicultural settings (such as in Hong Kong) (1997, 9). Gladney, by invoking the phrase "oriental Orientalism", argues how China has a state-nurtured project of both portraying an exotic other and reflecting on one's own values—which I briefly touched upon when mentioning China's ethnic classification project. According to Paul O'Connor and Begum Raees Baig's analysis, Hong Kong, too, presents a type of "oriental Orientalism" through media representations and Cantonese vocabulary (2015), which concurs with John Nguyen Erin and Lisa Yuk-Ming Leung findings regarding South Asian minorities' representation in Hong Kong media as well (2015). I believe Layla's perception of Hong Kong's Pakistani community reflects the broader problem of racism and also portrays the varying subjective positions of Muslims in multicultural environments, like Hong Kong, as one not only faces obstacles concerning the practice of his/her faith but also other forms of marginalization that may be based on ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status. The case also shows the intricate web of power relations that subaltern individuals may face. The several vectors that stem from such relations and act on the

person leave the individual in a varying position of inclusivity, depending on the person's identity, within the society that s/he attempts to steps in.

One thing to note is that not all non-Chinese Muslims that I interviewed held the same opinion. For instance, Amira, the aforementioned informant who narrated about her struggles with veiling, thought that Hong Kongers were becoming more open to "others" and South Asian Muslims, specifically. She justified her statement by narrating her own experience as someone who wore a *hijab* and worked for a luxurious fashion company. According to her, since the company, knowing about her religious sensitivities, preferred her over 600 other job applicants, this represented an act of inclusion which she experienced in many other occasions in her life in Hong Kong.

Returning to Pure/Cultural Islam Discourse

During her undergraduate study in the UK, Layla joined the Muslim Student Association of her university, which was primarily led by a group of British Pakistanis. She described that the events that they had organized were "not fun for most of us" as the president of the association, who was a British Pakistani himself, had "set the tone for the group by his conservative attitude." Layla's critique was not limited to the association being boring, as she believed that they were being "hypocritical" in some ways.

> When they made events, they would try to make it really conservative. In all of the events, they would split into like 'brothers events' and 'sisters events'. And then they would have a girls side and the guys side in other events as if they were saying 'here's a little veil, don't cross it'. But once you left the function room, there was mixing. And I just felt like they were kind of being hypocritical. Like, why are you trying to do this?

Layla's experience demonstrates the issues that arise in multicultural settings where a group comes together for a religious purpose, as people's varying approaches toward certain Islamic principles may not meet on common ground. Unlike Layla, some of the people that I talked to complained that the MSA (of an American university that they went for an exchange program) was too "liberal" and that people had no sensitivity towards segregation. Those that found such student associations too liberal sought alternative Muslim groups that helped individuals attending religious gatherings to know more about the Islamic doctrine—as a way to keep one's self in check, as was also mentioned by Shahid and Nabeeh. Layla, on the other hand, had a more specific recipe that decided whether she should spend time in a certain Islamic community or not.

> It is possible to be completely alone in a place where no one is Muslim and still be a fully practicing Muslim, although I do think that a community would help if it is healthy. If the community is very toxic, then that would have the reverse effect. What I mean by a toxic community is that which has a mentality of 'oh, if you are a woman stay at home and don't educate yourself!'. So it is like the communities where they conflate culture with religion and assume that their culture is religion. So, the communities that just judge you and everything that you do, instead of encouraging you to be the best person you can be, is a number one no-no to me.

Layla believes that many of the seemingly Islamic and non-progressive practices were most of the time cultural ideas that came to be regarded as "Islamic". However, when I explicitly asked her about her thoughts of the terms 'cultural Islam' and 'true Islam', Layla mentioned that she did not believe such concepts were adequate. 'True Islam', according to her, was a very arrogant concept since everyone had their practice of Islam and how one practiced Islam depended on the person. To elaborate further on her point, Layla provided her own experience in Malaysia which

aided her in formulating an idea of how a Muslim should distinguish between what is cultural and what is not.

> I think we should go back to the basics. Would the Quran say: 'please act like an Arab'? No. For example I spent 4 months in Malaysia last year, and stayed with a Yemeni family. So, I got to see Islam in the Yemeni family and Islam in Malaysia. And I was able to observe what practices were in common and what differed. So, I think the common practices that concur with the Islamic teachings would be 'Islam'. All the other things, like the different clothes they wore, or what they did in their free time is all peripheral—although both groups were still Muslims.

Layla's proposal that we should go back to the basics, and thus be able to differentiate between Arab culture and Islam is interesting in many ways as it proposes a certain kind of 'fundamentalism' that vastly differs from the generally conceived meaning of the word. Today, what is understood as 'Islamic fundamentalism' is a movement of Muslims who wish to 'go back' to the fundamentals of the Islamic state—as far as to the time of the Prophet and his companions. With a literalist view of the Islamic doctrine, Islamic fundamentalists argue that since the lives of the prophet and his companion represent the best potential of humankind, we should imitate them as a means of reaching that potential. I believe such a purpose is rather paradoxical as 'going back' would require one to alter every condition that makes today distinct from before—from technological developments to many other sociopolitical products of history. If we are to perceive history as a circular flow of causes and effects with peculiar inner developments of social groups, with many foreign influences (Boas 1920, 317), it would require one to simply untangle the complex webs of cause-effect chains—which is both unreasonable and unattainable. Layla's approach towards literalism, on the other hand, suggests that it is by going back to the Islamic doctrine that one can capture the potential limits of the diversity in Muslim lifestyles that center on certain meanings derived from the Islamic canon. Layla's

proposal is also interesting if we go back to Asad's argument that the idea of an anthropology of Islam should be mindful of the Islamic discursive tradition as an authority. Because, when Layla compared the practices of Muslims of different cultures, the very acts of Muslims served as an authority that suggested both what sort of practices were open to cultural influences, like the dress code, and what required the believer to accustom to the requirements of a certain practice, such as fasting. So, instead of explaining to me from the *hadith* or the views of certain Islamic scholars, Layla saw the commonality of certain practices as a sign of authenticity.

I would like to stress how crucial it is to understand that the acts practiced by the majority may take the form of legitimacy for the individuals. In other words, it is the repeated occurrence of an act in a society that normalizes it, thus making it a crucial component of 'reality', mostly in cultural forms. I believe it may be for this reason that what some of my interviewees, such as Fardin and Salman, saw as "cultural practices" rather than "Islamic practices" derives from their exposure to a multicultural environment where what they previously regarded as the true way of practicing a certain Islamic obligation may have been challenged by contrary observations. Perhaps, it is the lack of such exposure of local Muslim communities that lead to some of its former members accusing them of being "cultural Muslims" once the individual leaves and steps into a different society. Thus, although most of my informants proposed that to distinguish between 'culture' and 'Islam' one had to get educated in Islamic knowledge, their own understanding of "true Islam" too derived from their daily observations of the (new) community that they were in. As an example, if a person who comes from a Muslim community in which women wear the full-face covering (*niqab*), moves to a more international setting in which Muslim women have varying ways of practicing Islamic modesty in dressing, it would not make

much sense to claim that one is more "cultural" than the other as it would assume that, in the latter case, people's observations of each other and their very idea that there could be other ways of practicing modesty in dressing transcends cultural forms. However, if we are to perceive "culture" as commonly shared norms in a community, then the fact that the practice of modesty can differ among individuals is also a "cultural agreement", as it is a product of a particular time and context, based on a mutual agreement.

Thus, my observations lead me to suggest that assuming that there is a "true" way of practicing Islam, purified from "cultural" elements, is also to assume that one can transcend "culture" and have an understanding of Islam that is freed from all human factors while also being concerned with human relations. This was evident in the way most of my interviewees, like Salman, responded to my question regarding how they would deal with LGBT movements which were, to a certain extent, internalized by non-Muslim societies like Hong Kong; as my interviewees, instead of referring to the Islamic doctrine, invoked the discourse of "anti-discrimination" and how God is the only one to judge an individual of his/her sins. In such cases, especially if we take into account the Foucauldian discourse analysis, can one say that a Muslim's attitude toward LGBT members is independent of modern discourses that revolve around such topics, and which are produced under certain social conditions and norms—through language, media, and modern institutions? If we are to extend this example to wider contexts, such as the idea of a "cultural Islam", we see how the underlying cause that leads to the usage of suchlike terms is likely connected to our modern perception of 'religion' as a rigid system of 'beliefs' that is supposed to transcend our daily (cultural) experiences and thus belong to a "supernatural" domain—a topic that was touched upon above, borrowing from Smith's arguments.

Conclusion

With globalization and the integration of the world, many Muslims have to confront modernity and face scenarios in which a practitioner may face frictions between his/her faith and religious obligations and the challenges that the secular world brings. Such challenges become most evident when one moves from an Islamic society to a more secular one where "liberal ideas", which may at times contradict the Islamic doctrine, are predominant. The obstacles become more complex as, being a migrant, one may also face different forms of marginalization based on one's race or socioeconomic background. One such place is Hong Kong where Muslims form a diverse minority community and have to re-orient their religious life while subjectivizing Hong Kong's non-Islamic and multicultural atmosphere. While some may lose their faith, given the lack of social pressure on religiosity, others may seek new ways of upholding their religious obligations. Some of these ways include deliberately looking for a Muslim social circle where one can create a "*halal* atmosphere" and keep others in check with their obligations; having a firm understanding of "true Islam", that is stripped of its "cultural behaviors"; and constantly reflecting on one's self. Exploring these possibilities also reveals more about the different ways in which people's socialization experiences lead to the "enculturation" of Islamic principles, how discourse affects one's relationship with the divine, and how the construction of the modern language of explaining reality hinders us from comprehending a practitioner's faith and the cumulative traditions, like Islam, as a whole. Instead, I argue that we should be conscious of the language we use to both understand and represent people of faith and get rid of the modern understandings of the words "religion" and "to believe" and perhaps use more helpful ones such as "faith" and "cumulative traditions" (as proposed by Smith) which do not completely dismiss

the richness involved in one's dynamic relationship with the divine and the different moral positions of Muslims toward Islam. And it is the modern construction of 'religion' that leads to the discourse of "cultural/pure Islam", which falsely assumes that one can transcend culture as was evident in the paradoxical position that most of my interviewees held. Also, to do an anthropology of Islam and Muslims, one should not necessarily start with the Islamic discursive tradition, as Asad proposes, but rather start from the very lives of Muslims who subjectivize Islam in unique ways and who do not necessarily prioritize the Islamic discursive tradition over the very practices of individual Muslim lives that they observe, compare, and refer to in the everyday.

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