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Marriage "*sharia style*": everyday practices of Islamic morality in England

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Abstract

The growing visibility of Islam in the public spaces of Western societies is often interpreted in the media as a sign of Muslim radicalisation. This article questions this postulate by examining the flourishing Muslim marriage industry in the UK. It argues that these 'halal' services, increasingly popular among the young generation of British Muslims, reflect the semantic shifting of categories away from the repertoire of Islamic jurisprudence to cultural and identity labels visible in public space. Informed by long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the British field of Islamic law, this article examines a Muslim speed-dating event, which took place in central London in 2013. It investigates how Islamic morality is maintained and negotiated in everyday social interactions rather than cultivated via discipline and the pursuit of virtuous dispositions. Using Goffman's "frame analysis" and his interpretation of the social as a space of "performances" as well as recent anthropological reflections on "ordinary ethics" (Lambek) and "everyday Islam" (Schielke, Osella and Soares), it examines the potential for such practices to define the contours of a new public culture where difference is celebrated as a form of distinction.

Keywords Islam · England · Morality · Sharia · Public culture

In the media, as well as in political discourse, the growing visibility of Islam in the public space of Western societies is often interpreted as proof of the rise of religious fundamentalism. This visibility is often considered problematic as it is understood as a sign of the resurgence of orthodox religious practices. Such representations have led the British government to establish strategies in the fight against terrorism following the London attacks of July 7, 2005, notably the highly controversial "Preventing Violent Extremism" (PVE). The latter has focused exclusively on Muslims, perceived as being an "at-risk population" needing close surveillance by the state. As Birt (2009) explains,

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the instigators of the PVE believe they must counter the attraction of Islam for the second and third generation, whom they perceive to be at risk of radicalization, by promoting a "progressive and moderate" English Islam.

This article questions the postulate of "radicalisation" by showing how Islamic morality, as manifested in the everyday practices of young English Muslims, remains fundamentally ambivalent, hybrid, and fluid. Using the concept of "ordinary ethics" developed by Michael Lambek (2010) and the notion of a "Islam *mondain*" developed by Soares and Osella (2009), I argue that the moral universe of English Muslims is less the reflection of norms imposed by religious institutions than the product of cultural interactions and ordinary forms of sociability. I suggest that these modes of ethical engagement should not be interpreted as signs of communitarian withdrawal but rather as manifestations of a new public culture where religious difference is celebrated as a form of distinction.

This article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork begun in 2008[1] and continued in 2012[2] and 2013–2014[3] in England (in London and in Birmingham) in diverse spaces where Islamic norms have made their appearance, particularly amidst the flourishing Muslim marriage industry. The methods used for this research consisted in participant observation in 'sharia councils' (mistakenly called 'sharia courts' in the media) as well as law firms specializing in Islamic law, observation of a working group on Muslim marriages at the Ministry of Justice, Muslim marriage preparation courses, professional Muslim mediation and match-making services. I also conducted interviews with 'moral entrepreneurs' and 'shariah law' experts in order to gain deeper insights into their ethos and working methods. The purpose of this study was to provide an empirically grounded representation of the Islamic legal culture of the UK as it routinely finds expression in various spheres of life, politics, consumption, leisure and sociability. By mapping out urban spaces where certain "moral rubrics" (Deeb and Harb 2013:19)[4] drawn from sharia law take root in public life and by documenting the everyday practices of observant Muslims striving to lead a modern and ethical lifestyle, my aim was to study Western modernity from the perspective of its periphery. Moving away from the methodological individualism that dominates in debates on multiculturalism, this work explores zones of tensions and interpenetrations between secular and religious notions of justice, as well as the power of the collective imagination in shaping Islamically responsible subjects.

I conceive the interactions documented in this research as manifestations of a new 'public culture' in the sense that they reveal the emergence in public of cultural, social and potentially political expressions of differences. As Arjun Appaduraï phrases it, because of the increased pace of migration and electronic mass mediation, "ordinary people have begun to deploy their imagination in the practice of their everyday lives" (1996:5). "It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas (…) of moral economies and unjust

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[4] According to Deeb and Harb (2013:19) "Moral Rubrics (…) are the different sets of ideals and values that are revealed as well as produced through discourses and actions in major registers (…). In some cases they take the form of prohibitions, and in other cases the form of what one ought to do."

rule (…). The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (1996:7). With the deterritorialization of culture and religion, classic forms of knowledge and authority in Islam have been challenged and Muslims' social imaginaries have found new sources of inspiration. Globalization – understood here as a process of intensification of world-wide social relations and economic exchanges which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away - has transformed the work of imagination, enabling the emergence of "communities of sentiment" beyond national borders (Appaduraï 1996). This transnational dimension of Islam, as "a public space of normative reference" (Bowen 2004) opens up possibilities for simultaneously redefining the liberal foundations of the public sphere - "a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner 2002: 62) - and the normative basis of Islam.

This article focuses on one single episode of 'halal' speed-dating event, which took place in central London in 2013, and which illustrates these cultural dynamics particularly well. The association of a term derived from Islamic jurisprudence ('halal') with one derived from the "matchmaking" industry ("speed-dating") is revealing of the new social imaginaries and cultural hybrids that this research seeks to document. Informed by my long-term immersion in the field of Islamic law in the UK, I analyse the tensions that emerge when gender norms derived from Islamic prescriptions related to modesty and self-restraint come to contradict the logics of the liberal market, which incites customers to maximise value for money. Participants' difficulty to perform "the good Muslim" in the competitive environment of "match-making" reveals the intrinsic fragility of religious norms and the inherent ambiguities and doubts, which mark the modern human experience.

Another illustration of this fundamental uncertainty is the Islamic certification "*halal*," situated at the intersection of commercial and religious categories. Indeed, the category "*halal*" no longer exclusively refers to behaviours and life habits authorized by the sharia, nor does it concern only meat, but nowadays includes diverse goods and services, the use of which opens up various aspects of life and enjoyment to Muslims, while at the same time making them their own (Göle 2014:7). As this term enters into currency, it gradually loses its original prescriptive value and takes on new cultural and identitarian meanings. The symbolic legitimacy of the term "*halal*" reveals the tacit admission that activities thus labelled are not in fact entirely in line with Islamic precepts according to which desires must be measured and controlled in daily life (Id Yassine 2014). In this manner the rules of life as identified by the sharia have little by little freed themselves from the pure domain of worship ('*ibadât*) to adapt to the larger sphere of human transactions (*mu'amalât*), thus contributing to a modern lifestyle that is both urban and ethical. The practice of "*halal*" speed-dating documented in this article illuminates the changes in meaning at work when "*halal*" enters the commercial sphere and is presented as a guarantee of virtuous life.

In counterpoint to recent studies, which concentrate on the "ethical formation" of the subject via the pursuit of virtuous dispositions (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Agrama 2010), this article is less invested in studying the pedagogy of piety than in examining actors' ethical engagement via everyday practices of leisure, consumption and sociability. I focus on "framing" dynamics (Goffman 1974) that occur in ordinary interactional experiences and more specifically on moments of rupture as well as on multiple-game reference frames which involve hybridation, translation and adaptation processes. Because such situations generate ambiguities and misunderstandings, they

provide interesting insights on the implicit rules that regulate the secular public sphere. These situations of disjuncture between actors' performances and the frame used by receivers to make sense of them demonstrate that the quest for the "good ethical life" - that is, the search for "living rightly" according to one's faith – is a tightrope walk during which each step involves finding the right balance between values that are not all necessarily dictated by faith. These ambiguous performances illuminate the fragmented and ambivalent nature of modern subjectivities based on the coexistence of contrasted motivations, objectives, and identities (Ferrié 2004). It is this "moral flexibility" (Schielke 2009) which, in my view, best characterises Islamic modernity in particular (Göle 2000) and religious modernity in general (Hervieu-Leger 2003). By introducing new norms to the arenas of modern social life, Islamic moral subjectivity implies lifestyles, forms of sociability, and ways of being in public, which disrupt the liberal foundation of Western modernity.

The emergence of "sharia" in England: From the mosque to the market

The majority of English Muslims are of immigrant origin, coming from countries in South Asia, particularly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. According to the 2001 census (Lewis 2010, 19), they represent 1.6 million people, that is 2.7% of the total population. Their highest concentration is found in the big cities of the south and the center of England, that is London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bradford, and Leeds. In spite of rapid changes due to generational renewal, most mosques are differentiated not only by ethnicity but also by their doctrinal teaching. The schools of thought identified in English mosques include the currents of Barelwi, Deobandi, Jama'at-i-Islami, Ahl-i-Hadith, Shiite et Ahmadiyya (Lewis 2002). Most Pakistanis belong to the Barelwi tradition and consequently the mosques are strictly aligned according to the confessional affiliation of the local community where they are implanted.

The appearance of Sharia councils, improperly called "Islamic tribunals" by the press, reflects the transformations of Muslim religious practice in England. Indeed, the councils came into being in the eighties in response to the growing demand for divorce amongst women in the community. In Islam, if men can unilaterally pronounce a *talaq* to repudiate their wives, the wives themselves must go through the mediation of an imam if they are to separate from their spouses. It is furthermore ironic that these councils, perceived from outside as misogynistic institutions, are considered by the women who go to them as a means of accessing their rights (*firpù*) within Islamic tradition. These councils must not, however, be compared to tribunals since they may only emit judicial opinions without any directly applicable legal value. They do not pronounce any verdict. They only give rulings (*fatwa*), which the faithful are free to take into consideration, or not.

If quite a few of these councils remain affiliated with mosques, some of them have little by little left these specifically religious spaces (Bano 2004). In fact, one might say that Sharia gained visibility precisely in extricating itself physically from the premises of the mosque in order to be practiced in autonomous institutions. Before the creation of councils, imams used to offer religious and spiritual guidance to the faithful in their own local mosques, including mediation for conjugal disputes and the writing up of divorce certificates. With the growth of divorces, the imams came to judge this activity

as distancing them from their traditional function, that is the preparation of Friday sermons and the provision of religious guidance in a wider sense. Thus councils gradually freed themselves from the mosques to become institutions that specialized in mediation and the issuing of Islamic divorce certificates. For example, the Islamic Sharia Council UK (ISC-UK) in East London has recently moved into a former candy shop, which has been repurposed, to this end, equipped with a waiting room and offices. Consultation fees can be paid by credit card. The Muslim Law Sharia Council (MLSC) had also long been hosted by the Muslim College at Ealing (an educational institution) and is now located in a little office in Wembley. Most cases are taken care of by mail, without it being necessary for the clients to be physically present. It must also be noted that the relationship of "customer-service provider" is quite different from that of a spiritual guide toward a believer.

Indeed, the market has played an instrumental role in making Islamic difference visible in the secular public sphere of England. Ironically, "shariah law" gained some degree of public legitimacy when it was turned into a commodity on the constantly growing market of identities. To respond to the desire of younger generations of Muslims to incorporate Islamic norms and principles into their daily life, "sharia compliant" products and services (offered by specialized insurance companies, banks, law firms, etc.) have flourished in the major cities of the UK.

While first generation immigrants from South Asia primarily defined themselves according to their ethnic origin, new generations born in England identify more systematically by their belief in Islam and their belonging to the *umma*. According to Tariq Modood (1990), this turning point was triggered by the Rushdie affair. The protests against *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwa* pronounced by Ayatollah Khomeini opened the floodgates of an unprecedented wave of islamophobia fed by the press, depicting Muslims as dangerous fundamentalists. This has since doubtless been exacerbated by the events of September 11 and the London attacks of July 2005.

For newer generations, the rediscovery of faith and the estrangement from their "culture of origin" imply a new relationship with ethical living. The matrimonial encounters that I describe in this article are an answer to these new demands among those who seek a "middle path." The vast majority of the young people I met during this research insists upon the importance of a Muslim marriage and convey the need for assistance in their search for the ideal spouse. While expressing reservations about "arranged marriages," they also refuse to engage in practices that in their eyes would distance them from their faith. The increasing demand for mediated encounters among young Muslims has opened a new market niche within the British marriage industry, as illustrated by the multiplication of public conferences dealing with marriage in Islam, Muslim marriage preparation courses, Muslim dating websites and match-making events on offer in Britain's main cities. Other researches have confirmed this tendency (Rozario 2012; Ahmad 2012; Samuel 2012; Rozario and Samuel 2012). The success of services like "*halal* speed dating" is thus the sign of a re-Islamisation that depends more upon market-mediated practices of sociability than upon ideological indoctrination (i.e the mastery of sacred texts).

In the ethnographic vignette that follows, I illustrate the complex 'framing' (Goffman 1991) dynamics in which actors involved in a 'halal speed dating' event are caught as they seek to be 'read' by others as observant Muslims. I highlight their troubles to remain within the inherently precarious 'halal' frame and the justifications they use to anchor their performance in the slippery terrain of Muslim matchmaking.

"*Halal*" speed dating

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in the beginning of the winter, a group of approximately twenty people has convened in a seminar room of Birbeck College in central London. People are not here to attend a lecture, rather the purpose of the gathering is an "Islamic Marriage Event" organised by the association *Islamic Circles*.[5] These encounters have been designed to provide a service to the Muslim community by helping singles find "the perfect spouse." On the poster displayed at the room's entrance door, the slogan "Do not date! Do not cohabit! Get Married!" can be read. Mirzan Raja, the organiser, has directed the association for twelve years. He is 37 years old and a father of two. He was born in England from migrant parents of Indian origin. Mirzan has been a member of a Sharia council for some years. This experience has made him aware of the need for such a service. When English Muslims marry religiously they divorce in the same way – a fact that reflects a more general tendency in the English population. These mediated encounters allow both the never married and the divorced to widen their marriage options.

Yet "matchmaking," even the "Islamic" version, remains controversial. Mirzan admits to regularly receiving threats from Muslims who consider his activity *haram* (illicit) and contrary to Islam. When we met in 2013, he explained that an angry woman spat in his face during a similar event he had organised in the context of the Global Peace and Unity Conference[6] at the Excel convention centre in London's Eastside. Nevertheless, the popularity of these encounters continues to grow as can be seen by the proliferation of "*halal*" dating services, as well as the continuous flow of participants entering the room on this early Sunday afternoon. Mirzan gives several reasons for this popularity, one of which is that parents are no longer able to set up potential spouses. Muslims of the second and third generations no longer wish to marry a relative or someone from "the village" of their parents who can speak little English and/or is poorly educated. The moral impossibility of dating or of having temporary romantically-oriented living arrangements in Islam and the central role of the family encourages many single Muslims to turn towards new forms of encounters certified "*halal*."

According to Mirzan, the elders are no longer fulfilling their duty and their "post-colonial thinking" - which consists of blaming the English for everything that goes badly in the community- is not in tune with the experience of the young. "Marriage is all that remains to this generation and look at the result: the number of divorces keeps growing! We need a Muslim Spring in England; we need to get rid of our leadership!" he exclaims. Among the youth that were the subject of this research, the failure of the elders in their traditional role as matrimonial facilitators was a common refrain. The "post-colonial thinking" that Mirzan refers to underlines the will to leave behind any sense of victimhood in order to express a right to cultural difference. In fact, the encounters show that the youth are no longer seeking to lie low in the name of integration, but are rather embracing their unabashed "Muslimness." I see women entering into the room in brightly coloured *hijab* and men with carefully groomed beards. Other women are also present who are not covered or simply wear a scarf

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[5] *Islamic Circles* is a nonprofit community network established in eastern London in 2001. The network organises many events such as classes, seminars, workshops, and gatherings related to Islam.

[6] The Global Peace and Unity Conference is a periodic two-day conference organised by the Islam Channel in the ExCel Convention Centre, located on the former London docks. According to Wikipedia, it is the biggest multicultural and ecumenical event organised by Muslims in Europe, boasting over 55,000 visitors in 2006.

around their necks, as well as men in *jellaba*, jeans, or a more classic suit. The dress code ranges from the most traditional to Islamic (or simply metropolitan) chic.

Through the years Mirzan has created a number of subcategories for his events ever since he realised that the generic category of "Muslim" was too broad to answer the specific needs of certain groups. Now he organises special events for converts, the over 40, students, professionals, East Asians, Arabs, and Bangladeshis. With the growing presence of French Muslims in London, he recently had to put into place events specifically designed for "French-speaking Muslims." Today's event is devoted to this new subcategory. Among the participants, we find two brothers from Mauritius, a Senegalese man (the only black participant) and a majority of English and French people of North African origin. Mirzan does not like having to separate people by ethnic or national origin because he believes that what should unite Muslims is the notion of *umma* (the community of believers). But as a businessman, social entrepreneur, and pragmatic militant (these are his own terms), he simply decided to respond to the demand and leave aside the ideal of a unified community. These adaptations show that ethnic origin remains an important -but no longer compulsory- criterion in the search for a spouse. This fact has been verified by Fauzia Ahmad's research (2012, 207) among the young Muslim women graduating from English universities.

Before the event, various forms to fill out as well as pamphlets explaining the general principles of the event have been sent by email to the participants. One of them, entitled, "General Etiquette" attracted my attention:

- Try to be in a state of ritual purity (*wudū*), if possible.
- The best way to begin is to recognise that you are a servant of Allah attending the event because you, like the other participants, are seeking a spouse and you want therefore to conduct yourself in the best manner possible.
- It is important to recognise that finding an appropriate spouse is an enormous problem for Muslims today. This problem must be addressed practically and not only via conferences and seminars bearing on the nature of marriage according to *fiqh* (jurisprudence). The education of the entire community is necessary, including parents and *ulamas* who also need to collaborate with social experts such as conjugal counsellors and psychotherapists in order to find realistic solutions. We hope that today's encounter will reflect this humble attempt. Such initiatives are new for our community. They must be evaluated according to Sharia principles. We will need time to adjust, but these initiatives can improve only if members of the community participate, take them seriously, facilitate their organisation, and make constructive remarks.
- "If I wear a *niqab*, should I take it off?" No, that is entirely up to you.
- Prayer supplies will be placed at your disposal
- These encounters will continue to be organised until mosques, groups of Muslims, community elders, and other married people take up this role and organise them themselves
- Say your *du'a* (invocations) and ask Allah for advice before, during, and after the event. Say the *istikhârah*[7] prayer when it is time.

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[7] The 'istikhâra prayer (*al-salât al-istikhâra)* is a prayer of consultation addressed to God during a test or for coming to a decision.

Little by little, the participants fill up the room. Some come with relatives and friends who can peacefully watch the session from the back, after which "the brothers" take their place on one side and "the sisters" on the other. A mother scans the men present with an air of disapproval. "They're all over 40! Much too old for my daughter!" she complains as she sits next to me while making a sign to her 26 year old who has already joined the group of "sisters".

At enrolment, the visitors each receive a numbered badge in order to preserve their anonymity. Mirzan, the master of ceremonies, wears a *shalwar kamiz* (long shirt over the wide puffy pants often worn by men in South Asia) and a little white crocheted skullcap. For events organised for professionals he tends to prefer a suit, but today his role is closer to that of an "elder," a wise person seeking to guide the young in their journey towards married life. With his relaxed, plain-spoken manner and occasional swearing, he embodies an odd mix of *imam* and businessman.

Undeniably charismatic, Mirzan presents the "rules of the game". During this fifteen-minute presentation, illustrated by PowerPoint slides, the participants are initiated into the art of finding the ideal spouse. Mirzan explains how to write an effective profile, present oneself modestly and pleasantly, and open communication with a potential partner. He wants everything to be clear to everyone: the search for a spouse is a full time job. Just like a job search, "the best allies are friends and family." "You must look for your spouse everywhere, at the workplace or at the university," he explains. "Starting now your family is your cell phone and your internet connection!" "Success depends on three things: 1) your intention: you must be ready for marriage, 2) your attitude: it must be upstanding, 3) success comes from Allah!"

Having the "right" profile is the key to success. Index cards are given out in order for the participants to mention their age and status (single, divorced, etc.) and to explain what they are looking for and what they can offer in return. The participants can also add a photo if they want to be more easily recognised. "Writing a profile is like writing a resumé. To succeed you have to show yourself in the best possible light." The key to writing a good profile, he tells us, is to take the exercise seriously. "It's an awkward process, but once you have a good profile you can use it over and over!" What's more, if the participants do not find their ideal partner today, they can join a database for singles on findyourmuslimpartner.com, a website maintained by the association. 50,000 Muslims in London have already joined.

Mirzan now addresses matters of communication. He stresses that the English of the Victorian era followed the principles of romantic love. He compares these principles to the chivalrous code of the French Middle Ages and makes reference to "courtly love" defended by the Three Musketeers. Though times have changed, Mirzan thinks that these ideals are still valuable. Consequently he encourages the participants to adopt gracious manners when interacting with each other. He gives examples of agreeable conversation ("I say *du'a* for you."; "I wish the best for you.") and recommends that they send a thank you SMS to the people whom they have met.

One extra minute is given to the participants to finish up their profile cards and they are then divided into three groups for an exercise to "break the ice." Visitors are asked to introduce themselves and to answer the questions that Mirzan asks them as he wanders from one group to another. "What is your favourite film? Do you know how to cook? What is your favourite dish? How do your friends and family describe you? Do you like to travel?"

Since the encounter promotes marriage as its ultimate goal, the participants try to present themselves as practicing believers. The effect of this is that they each compete in appearing more pious than the other. A young woman explains that she tries not to listen to music because it is "*haram*" (illicit, forbidden). One man says that his favourite activity is to spend time with family. Another woman mentions that she recently saw the film *The Butler*, which she found "very decent, very appropriate" and she repeats the adjectives several times throughout the conversation. Most of the participants seem shy and avoid looking into the eyes of the opposite sex. Generally, good manners and civility reign.

While men move between groups, the women remain seated and still. When introductions are over, the participants write down the number of the persons they like and with whom they would like to speak to later. A new group of men then joins the group of women and the introduction game starts over again. Everything seems to be going along in perfect harmony when suddenly something unexpected happens:

"Cut the crap!" cries a young woman of about 20, wearing a huge *hijab*, faux snakeskin high heels, and slim-fit jeans. Clearly this woman is losing her patience. "What do you expect of me if I become your wife?"

A barely perceptible gasp spreads throughout the room. The group is seized with discomfort. Apparently, the young woman is not on her first try (an organiser tells me he has seen her attend several encounters this month), and has no more time to waste. She is looking for someone honest and specific in his expectations, someone capable of stating clearly how he imagines married life. This woman's performance transgresses the norm of feminine modesty that such events try to promote, even if the women generally have greater social skills than the men who struggle (and sweat!) to find something appropriate to say.

"We are here because we are all Muslims! I mean…I say my five prayers a day and I want a wife who will help me support my *din* (religion)," explains Faysal, who bravely attempts to re-establish communication.

Careful to maintain cohesion, Mirzan goes to the group where the outburst has occurred. He advises everyone to avoid putting off crucial questions. "Marriage has nothing to do with love! It's a matter of sharing values in common and understanding each other!" he explains in order to encourage them to put aside their shyness. These remarks seem to contradict what he said earlier about courtly love. This is only in appearance however because the message Mirzan wants to get across is simple: marriage is based above all on the respect and the understanding of the other.

One by one, the participants recite their list of desired traits. Amir from Bristol wants "someone patient and who understands the basics of religion." Alia, a businesswoman from the East of London, is looking for "someone honest who likes to travel." Tahzeen, 27, works for an NGO and wants to marry "someone down-to-earth, who has a sense of humour, and who can encourage her in her religion." Strengthening faith through marriage seems to be a leitmotif among the participants. While some of them come accompanied by their parents, expressing this desire represents a form of resistance to parental authority in one's private life (Ahmad 2012, 205). The fact that young people call on these marriage services bears witness to a certain degree of disconnection with the experience of their elders.

As the introductions come to an end, the participants glance at the profiles displayed on the wall so that they can choose the candidate most able to fulfil their dreams of

married life. "Inspired? Is there someone you want to talk to?" I ask a woman wearing a red silk *hijab*. She tells me that she prefers for a man to make the first move, as she does not want to embarrass herself. Then she smiles and murmurs "Don't turn around now! In fact, I like the man in the blue shirt behind you."

Some couples have already convened in the adjoining room while a group of men gets ready for the *asr* prayer in the main room. Carpets lie next to each other on the floor and men line up to replenish themselves with prayer after this performance which seems to have exhausted them. So as not to disturb this moment of devotion, I go into the hallway in the hope of starting a conversation. Soon I come across Fazel, a French salesman of Algerian origin in his thirties who is about to leave. I ask (in French) if he doesn't want to wait a little longer to see if someone is interested in him.

> Fazel: You see, I don't think I'm going to find anyone in this kind of place. I'm not very religious and everyone here seems so conservative!
>
> Julie: So why did you choose to come here?
>
> Fazel: Well, I've had two English girlfriends in the past and …. to be totally honest with you, they really drink too much!

In a corner of the room, a Senegalese man is reading the Koran. No one has wanted to speak with him. Despite the discourse of a unifying ideal (*umma*), ethnic origin is a real obstacle when it comes to marriage. A little sad to see him by himself, I open a conversation. It is the first time he has attended an event of this type. Divorced for two years from a Senegalese woman whom had joined him in London, he is now ready to "pass on to something else."

> "This time I don't want to make the same mistake. I have to find someone here! But it's not easy when you're black!" he complains.

The event has attracted an important number of divorcees seeking their "soul mate" after an arranged marriage that failed. If divorce remains a social taboo (especially for women), divorced peoples' status has improved in the last fifty years. Certain divorced women with children have developed different expectations towards marriage. According to Mirzan, some of them choose to be co-wives, that is the second or third wife of a married man. Mirzan claims that he receives five to ten requests a week from women "comfortable with the idea of a part-time husband." He explains, "Women with a career don't want a full time husband. They don't have time for that." Unlike younger women, they do not want the double burden of professional work and housework.

It is not, however, only the lack of time that drives them to become "co-wives." Two other factors enter in. The first is the stigma against divorcees. The second is the still common recourse of seeking a spouse from abroad (15,500 women were admitted as spouses into the United Kingdom in 2011, according to the figures of the Ministry of the Interior). The popularity of Muslim marriage events is directly due, according to Mirzan, to transformations of gender relations and the ever-growing gulf between the

sexes. The Islamic version of "speed dating" that Mirzan's association provides certainly offers a space for a non-liberal expression of "masculinity" and "femininity."

As the event ends and visitors begin to leave the room, I wonder if the dynamics that I have just observed are representative of the alternative public spaces that have emerged in the wake of the Global Islamic Revival. Indeed, can such spaces be considered as a true "alternative" for those trying to combine an urban lifestyle with a "good ethical life," Muslim-style? (Billaud 2016). Or is it simply a commercial niche for moral entrepreneurs like Mirzan? This ambiguity is without doubt a distinctive characteristic of the Revival. As Ira Lapidus (1997) explains, contemporary Islamic movements are a coin with two faces. On one side they are a response to the conditions of modernity, to the centralisation of state powers and the development of capitalist economies. On the other side, they are a cultural expression of modernity. The insistence on Islamic values is not the expression of a return to the past but rather an attempt to respond to present day problems by way of a renewed commitment to the basic principles of Islam. Hence, matrimonial services labelled "*halal*" continue to attract those disappointed by the excesses of liberalism, especially when it concerns intimate relations such as those that marriage is supposed to render sacred. And further, as an English professor of Moroccan origin asked upon leaving the room, "Where do you find a partner when you don't want to go to a club or to a bar?"

Islam as a form of distinction

"Islamic marriage events" is clearly a euphemism used in order to avoid the term "speed dating" which implies the search for a form of "fast food" relationship. However these events are named, they are nevertheless fully a part of the horizon of leisure in the capital. For the last twenty years intense debates have emerged over the kinds of free-time activities and places that are appropriate for those who follow the Muslim faith. Such debates bear witness to a questioning of the normative basis of Islam. More generally they demonstrate the moral flexibility of new generations of English Muslims whose identity does not partake in a personal experience with immigration. Paradoxically, "*halal*" spaces of sociability offer up new opportunities for meeting someone outside of traditional circles (the mosque, the family, etc.). These spaces attract a generation of young (and not-so-young) people who take their religion seriously and who want to open up their possibilities while enjoying themselves within the limits – constantly re-negotiated – of their religion.

"Halal" matchmaking events have therefore opened a space of experimentation in which British Muslims collectively learn a common language for talking about relationships. However, the moments of tensions, misunderstandings, the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion documented here illustrate that far from being self-evident, Islamic norms remain the object of constant negotiations as to what constitutes proper "muslimhood" and "piety", and beyond these, adequate norms of behaviour and "civility".

In counterpoint to liberal definitions of the public sphere as a space of "communicative action" (Habermas 1989) where beliefs, morality and civic virtue are conceived as inessential in the process of setting public debate in motion (and should therefore be interiorised), the practices documented in this article reveal a mode

of investment of the public sphere where virtues and morality play an essential role. However, the moral forces that guide Muslim believers on their path to a virtuous life are not systematically derived from Islam but are rather part of a global lifestyle interpenetrated with values, which belong to their immediate environment. These values are not spread from the limited space of the mosque, but circulate also through consumer practices, everyday leisure, and ways of being in public. The line of separation between civic reason (deliberative) and religious morality (disciplinary and normative) established by the liberal conception of the public sphere is being reconfigured through these everyday interactions. By collectively redefining norms of gendered behaviours, the Muslim dating scene contributes to shape a "counter-public" (Warner 2002) where a specific cultural sensitivity and alternative conceptions of "civility" are expressed and performed.

However, interactions documented here underline that the behavioural code, far from being obvious, is the object of constant reminders, performances, and counter-performances. The frontiers of the moral community are influenced by a combination of types of knowledge which 'frame' interactions in ambiguous ways, forcing actors to constantly justify their interventions (Goffman 1974). There are on one hand the kinds considered authoritative (the vertical) and on the other, everyday habits and experiences (the horizontal). Far from being fixed and rigid, these frontiers require an effort from actors who must therefore take part in a certain number of rituals and adhere to a code of conduct in order to negotiate said frontiers. Nevertheless, the degree of obedience and involvement remains largely elastic, as demonstrated by the impatient woman's somewhat abrupt speech.

The moral repertoires identified here follow the dynamics of "ordinary ethics" as described by Michael Lambek (2010, 2), namely, a relatively implicit aspect of morality. In a secular context ethics is based on negotiations and compromise rather than on following a precise set of given rules. It is based on practice rather than knowledge or faith and it develops without drawing undue attention to itself. Thus judgments about "good" and "evil" are forged horizontally, through everyday interactions and sociability, rather than vertically through doctrine and institutions.

> "The ethical does not simply go without saying. Indeed, ethics can be found not only in the balance between continuity and innovation but in the movement or tension between the ostensible (manifest, explicit, conspicuous, declared, avowed, certain, normative, necessary) and the tacit (latent, implicit, ambiguous, subjunctive, aporetic, paradoxical, uncertain, transgressive, possible), and between the application of criteria and the recognition of their limits ». (Lambek 2010 : 28)

In contrast to Saba Mahmood's (2001, 2005) view according to which pious actors seek to cultivate virtue through bodily discipline, the practices of young English Muslims presented here are characterized by a performative staging of the self. I use the notion of "performance" (Goffman 1969) here not to insinuate that the practices of actors are cynical or alienated responses to dominant norms. Rather, "performance" highlights their recognition and their participation in a moral system, which necessitates a certain use of the body. Indeed, rather than seeking to "cultivate virtue" by the embodied mastery of prescriptive

behaviours, actors try instead to cultivate a sense of distinction in using their bodies as a vehicle of meaning. The unabashed and willful adoption of Islamic stigma symbols (*hijab* for women, a beard for men, or collective prayer) is closer to what Nilüfer Göle (2003) perceives as a means of questioning the hegemonic discourse of liberal, secular Western modernity via a re-appropriation of controversial symbols meant to divert their meaning. Externally perceived as signs of submission, they become a means of self-affirmation as well as affirmation of the collective identity in a community of practice that is in the process of forming (Wenger 1998). While Mahmood tends to overdetermine the pious leanings of actors in insisting on techniques of subjectivation, one could rather see in their performances the shifting signs of cultural influences and diverse "moral rubrics" - to take up the expression of Deeb and Harb (2013).

In her ethnography of dance events in Greece, Jane Cowan (1990) explains that ambiguous social meanings are incorporated into and expressed by the body, not only through discipline, but also through pleasant forms of day-to-day sociability. The marriage encounters, just like the dance events in their Greek context as described by Cowan, are the place where men and women experience themselves as gendered subjects and where gendered differences and other social hierarchies are established, even celebrated. And yet, these encounters also reveal the moral tensions at work when an actor fails to conform to the behavioural expectations related to his or her sex. Indeed, the participants find themselves torn between their desire to embody the gender norms defined by Islam, and their rights as consumers of a service they have paid for. Because the symbolic universe of actors is not monolithic, because it is penetrated by multiple influences, actors' performances underline not so much the power of the norm as its intrinsic fragility. By joining in the game of '*halal*" encounters, more or less consciously, participants find themselves having to play the role or follow the "good Muslim" script. The incapacity or the refusal of certain group members to follow the rules of the game emphasizes the processual (Schielke 2009; Ferrié 2004) and fundamentally creative and performative nature of religious identity (Turner 1986). Furthermore, these striking creative solutions shift the meaning of contemporary "*halal.*" From its original usage as prescriptive injunction, it becomes itself a new cultural repertoire.

Conclusion

In an article published in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Fadil and Fernando (2015) warn against the excesses they perceive in current anthropological studies of "ordinary Islam" (Schielke and Debevec, 2012; Soares and Osella 2009; Marsden 2005; Deeb and Harb 2013). According to them, the way the concept of "everyday" has been recuperated by anthropologists of Islam emphasises only one side of the paradigmatic debate between "power/agency" and "unity/diversity" while insisting on human creativity in the face of the weight of norms. Moreover, putting the spotlight on "the everyday" fails to furnish the analytical elements, which would allow for an understanding of the phenomenon of piety. Worse yet, the theoretical framework of "Islam mondain," insisting as it does on the inconsistencies and contradictions of actors in search of virtue, denigrates in their view the reality and ontology of ultra-orthodox ways of life. In focusing on "ordinary Muslims" this kind of anthropology would make "extra-ordinary" other Muslims, for example those who choose to follow Salafism.

What I am seeking to show through this ethnographic vignette is the possibility of thinking of piety in totality, or more precisely, the possibility of considering the search for a virtuous life and of the everyday all at once. Indeed, if the phenomenon of the Islamic Revival denotes a certain unprecedented and worldwide renewal of interest of ordinary Muslims (that is, those who have no formal religious training) in exegetical texts, theological reasoning, and the quest for virtue, the "everyday" remains the key place for the unexpected to occur. Thus, even if the Revival spanning the Muslim world since the Seventies[8] implies a certain discipline of the self (Mahmood 2005), a certain relationship to the world and to knowledge, its manifestations are far from forming a monolithic framework of practices. In their search for a way of life in line with their faith, Muslims cannot extirpate themselves from the "immanent frame" (Taylor 2007) that marks their immediate environment. They cannot either curtail their social imagination, enlarged and transformed as it has been since the 1980s as a result of migration and electronic media (Appaduraï 1996). As I have explained elsewhere (Billaud 2016), morality is deeply anchored in the everyday experience of modernity. According to Charles Taylor (1989), our modern conception of the "self" is linked to morality. In attempting to portray the background for the moral and spiritual motivations of modern subjects, however, Taylor identifies a transition from an external meaning of the "self" in which signification derives from extraordinary actions to an interior meaning where signification lies amidst everyday actions. Morality in a secular age is thus fundamentally immanent and consequently inexorably flexible. By necessity, it finds its inspiration in multiple and hybrid sources.

Far from being opposed, the immanent and the transcendent frames constantly interact and are therefore fashioned by the multiple and contradictory forces of globalisation. A new public culture (in the sense of a space that enables the public expression of cultural difference) is emerging from these constellations, which is neither totally anchored in the ideological paradigms of Western modernity nor literally faithful to Muslim tradition. Some see in these developments the first signs of a post-Islamic era (Roy 1999; Bayat 2007; Burgat 2001). But should we not rather deduce that Islamic modernity comes into being by way of a kind of moral flexibility internal to the Islamic sphere itself? This flexibility gives access to spaces and ways of being in public which are distinct, without being entirely separate, from those originating in the liberal tradition. This form of public distinction should not be interpreted as a form of radicalization but rather as a sign of a new generation of Muslims, whose imagination has been shaped by the memory of postcolonial migration and a specific subjectivity (as British and Muslims) and which strives to participate in public life in its own terms.

Fadil and Fernando put forth a critique of the literature, which has mobilised the notion of "the everyday." In my view, their critique reflects their own bias against more orthodox ways of life such as those documented in researches on piety led by Talal Asad. To conceive piety as a process which mainly consists in disciplining the self tends to close off a vital element of our research: it forecloses examining the impossibility fatally confronting any modern individual in search of perfect purity of life and

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[8] The phenomenon of the Islamic Revival is defined by Saba Mahmood (2005,3) as a broad movement of a return to the sources of Islam. The term refers not only to the activities of political groups in conjunction with the state, but also more largely to a religious ethos and sensibility spread throughout contemporary Muslim societies. This sensibility has a palpable public presence in England, which is manifested in the proliferation of neighborhood mosques, Islamic teaching institutions as well as of products and services labeled "*halal*."

living. As I see it, there is here a parallel with anthropologists who seek for purity in their subject matter and are tragically doomed not to find it. We must mourn this wish. And yet it is in this very lack of purity, in the contradictions and tensions that result, that we can find the richest sources of meaning for both the discipline itself as well as for a better understanding of the human experience in general.

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