Islamic education and activism in theory and practice: the case of two online e-learning institutes

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I, Alessandra Palange, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The thesis explores the teaching of Islam online, particularly how Islamic educators formulate political ideas in online learning spaces. The research focused on the biography of the Prophet (*sīra*) classes at two Islamic institutes dedicated to teaching Islam to adult Muslims online. Inspired by critical discourse analysis and grounded theory methodologies, this study explores the audio lectures and other relevant learning resources over a one-year period. This investigation set out to identify the interpretative strategies employed in these online lectures, that is, how the instructors connect the origins of Islam with contemporary social and political issues to inform contemporary practice. It also aimed to provide a reflection on how different methodological approaches to the study of Islam impact on the potential for political imagination.

In the Islamic e-learning contexts, the instructors were critical of a range of epistemological and political ideas and sought to re-conceptualise these ideas using their understanding of normative Islam. The two online instructors often expressed similar concerns about, for example, defining the role of critical thinking, the modern sciences, premodern Islamic scholarship, contemporary Muslim education, and activism. The lecture content at times relied on ambiguity to coherently incorporate opposing ideas: critical thinking and obedience, political activism and quietism, religious pluralism and supremacy, and democracy and autocracy.

In both contexts, despite some differences, activism was defined as *daʿwa* (commonly translated as Islamic propagation but employed in the online lectures to refer to the education of Muslims) and *ʿibāda* (worship – particularly its public expressions). Because of the association of Islamic education with *daʿwa* and activism, the research findings suggest that the practice of education is perceived as instrumental to the construction of an epistemic hierarchy that informs ideas about social, economic and theological justice and a theory of social change inspired by the Prophet's life.

Impact Statement

This study is multidisciplinary and seeks to make an important contribution to different fields. From the most specific to the broadest possible impact, this research contributes to the study and practice of Muslim education, Islamic political theory, the anthropology of Islam and the study of transnational social movements. From a methodological perspective, this thesis has developed a working template to further the exploration and classification of interpretative strategies used in lectures and discussions about Islam. This study also demonstrates the potential of using Islamic e-learning resources as a data source for this purpose.

Additional data collection and analysis are necessary to understand how Muslim educators make Islamic traditions relevant to the contemporary world, thus contributing to wider methodological and political debates. This thesis therefore proposes an analytical approach that explores the relationship between methodological and political principles. Crucially, understanding this relationship can be useful in identifying and examining some common modes of criticality that are present in Islamic education today. As a result, this study can inform practitioners who wish to offer a diversity of Muslim perspectives and explore the construction of Islamic narratives in their teaching. In addition, this study can inform the work of researchers who wish to adapt this analytical approach to other themes that matter to Muslim educators.

This thesis also offers a contribution to the anthropology of Islam and Islamic political theory because it identifies Islamic adult education, and Islamic e-learning, as sites where the theorisation, critique and elaboration of methodological and political ideas take place at the grassroots level. It thus moves beyond the divide between the study of Islamic political theory and the study of Muslims. This thesis gives a detailed hermeneutical insight into the world of Islamic e-learning – a phenomenon that has not been investigated

extensively. It also provides a blueprint for much-needed research on the relatively new phenomenon of formal and non-formal, structured Islamic education online.

Finally, this research contributes to the study of social movements by highlighting the significance of grassroots education in political activism. It shows that many of the epistemological, methodological and political concerns expressed in Islamic e-learning environments can deepen our understanding of Islamic neo-traditionalism and neighbouring Islamic orientations. By expanding the themes that emerge from the data conceptually, the thesis also frames the revival of traditions as a common strategy employed across contemporary social movements to tackle shared challenges. In this way, this study questions the distinction between secular and religious activism and highlights the relevance of Muslim grassroots critique vis-à-vis wider political culture. By departing from an in-depth analysis of curricular content and moving outwards, this thesis contributes to the wider field of contemporary social movement theory.

Translations

Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations of Arabic terms reflect how the terms are commonly used within the online spaces where I conducted fieldwork. As will become evident, these translations are fluid and multifaceted as the instructors engage in the reformulation of key civic and political ideas. On a few occasions, I searched for the translations of Arabic words in Islamic Studies literature, encyclopaedic entries and dictionaries. Such occurrences are indicated in footnotes where citations are provided. A deeper analysis or exploration of Arabic and/or Islamic terms from a linguistic, historical or literary perspective is beyond the scope of this study.

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Introduction

Around a decade ago, I became interested in studying Islam and began to think about what this meant and how I could go about doing it. I told myself to read books about Islam, but predictably some questions followed: which books and by whom and, if they were classical works, whose commentary should guide my learning? I also thought about studying Islam informally and formally with different organisations, but this resulted in a similar set of seemingly simple but also difficult-to-answer questions: which group of Muslims should I choose to be my teachers and what would be the significance of my choice? I soon reached the conclusion that it is impossible to study Islam without seeking to understand the people who teach Islam, whether Muslims or not, and their politics (by which I mean their understanding of how society works or should work). This conclusion eventually led to this research. This reflection is not unique to studying Islam; it can apply to the study of any subject involving human beings, their faith, history and society. It has to do with a deeper realisation that all knowledge originates from a particular point of view.

During this time, I attended different types of classes in London. I went to "sisters-only" classes and study circles in the Muslim communities I encountered, as well as various Arabic courses. I was once invited to attend an afterschool Qurʾan class for secondary school pupils at a local mosque. I became increasingly interested in understanding the variety of learning opportunities that are available to Muslims, especially women (which is something I have not explored in this thesis as much; I will address this in my conclusion). After attending classes from different Muslim groups, I realised how scattered and unsystematic my learning journey had been, as, one day, I would attend a study circle on the book *Kitab al-Tawhid* by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703 - 1792), another day a class on the obligations of spouses, and, a week later, another on the etiquettes of fasting. It was at that point that I began to look for institutes that would provide a structured programme of study that would give me a fuller picture of "traditional" Islamic scholarship, that is, a good understanding of the seminal books and authors that have shaped

dimensions of Islam across the centuries in the different regions where Muslims have lived. When I was not able to find a course of this kind in my local community, I began to look further afield. This is how I became interested in traditional Islamic higher education and training (often called "*alimiyyah* courses" or advanced Islamic studies in the Muslim community) as well as the academic study of Islam. I had even considered applying for a degree in Islamic Studies at a mainstream secular university; however, some members of the community had warned me that a university wouldn't provide me with an "authentic" experience of Islamic learning or, worse, I would be brainwashed to accept "liberal-progressive", "sugar-coated" versions of Islam.

I realised then that *making a choice* about where to study or who to learn from involves much more than practical considerations such as timetables, costs and location. For Muslims, deciding where to acquire knowledge of their own faith can involve defining what "type" of Muslim they are or want to be and how they want to shape, through learning, their beliefs and lived experiences of Islam. At the very early stages of this process, if I talked to acquaintances about the possibility of studying in one place, I would often be warned by some that a certain place promoted deviant beliefs or practices that would misguide me. For others, a mosque would be too "Sufi" (mystical) because it promoted pantheistic beliefs, intercession and *mawlid* (Prophet's birthday) celebrations. For some, it was a problem that an Islamic institute would focus exclusively on one school of Islamic jurisprudence. For others still, a certain circle might be too "Salafi" because it monitored and regulated too rigidly people's choices regarding ritual practice and belief.

It felt at times that the decision to attend classes in a particular *space* was tantamount to choosing an identity, as I possibly embraced one orientation, with its rules of conduct and beliefs, over another. The problem for me was that, perhaps because of my anthropological curiosity, I did not want to "choose an identity" and be limited to one set of legal, spiritual and theological views. I was curious about all groups and wanted to learn about the scholars that inspired

them and the methods of interpretation that characterised their experience of Islam in the world today.

At some point in this journey, I started looking at the phenomenon of Islamic adult education through an anthropological lens. This is when I discovered a field of anthropology that I had never come across in my undergraduate years, the anthropology of Islam. The anthropology of Islam, or the study of how Muslims understand and experience their faith in local contexts, considers the wide variety of ways Muslims connect (or do not connect) with the body of texts that they associate with Islam. When I started reading about the anthropology of Islam, I began to make links between anthropology and my experience of Islamic education, namely the Islamic books that I had bought whilst exploring small independent Islamic bookshops across London and the various Islamic lectures I attended in person (as well as online). The discovery of this literature came in part as a relief. It offered me a lens to understand what I was experiencing, which also on a spiritual level helped reconnect my existing academic interests with my desire to understand Islam (and Muslim societies).

When I became a mother, the need to look after my children drove me to continue my search for a comprehensive Islamic studies programme online and that is where I became fascinated with "Islam online". Always with my anthropologist's hat on, I fed my curiosity with books about Islamic education, Muslim media, Islamic movements and contemporary intellectual history. I also enrolled in Islamic courses online to learn about the curriculum, the teaching methods and qualifications provided by these e-learning organisations. Islamic online education seemed to be a convenient way for Muslims who are parents, carers, full-time workers and students to study Islam in their spare time.

The first Islamic e-learning centre that I attended before this research had started was the Islamic Online University (now called International Open University, or IOU), an institute founded by well-known religious speaker Bilal Philips. IOU provides a degree programme (BA) in Islamic studies (BAIS) formulated on the blueprint of a mainstream academic university that is

recognised by educational bodies in Somalia, The Gambia and Malawi (International Online University, 2022). IOU was the original topic of this research study. However, after failing to receive adequate consent to conduct my study at this institution, I found several alternative e-learning institutes, including liberal-progressive and Shiʿi educational establishments. From this search came the idea of doing a comparative study of two online Islamic institutes.

This current study analyses courses on the biography of Prophet Muhammad (commonly referred to as the *sīra*) that I attended at two Islamic institutes based in the UK and North America. I also look at the biography of the Prophet taught at a secular university (institute C) to enrich the comparative analysis. These online course providers remain anonymous throughout this thesis (reasons for this will be provided in Chapter 3). The aim of this research project is to develop a better understanding of the interpretative practices employed by Islamic instructors online.

I aim to explore the construction of epistemological positions in the online classroom, that is, how course leaders discuss what knowledge is, how it can be acquired and for what purpose, and how these epistemological positions are linked to discussions about activism and political authority. I chose to focus on how the instructors developed political and civic ideas when teaching the life of the Prophet (based on the historical sources they choose to use) because I often observed a sustained effort to analyse contemporary social reality through religious stories without being able to identify a specific pattern.

This study may best be described as a virtual ethnography of two Islamic classes on the biography of the prophet with the objective of tracing intellectual roots, trajectories, and motifs of contemporary Islamic political thought amongst Muslim preachers, intellectuals and scholars online. This study is necessarily only a snapshot of a complex and changing reality, but it nevertheless shows how a set of shared traditions are interpreted, re-evaluated and re-elaborated, and how ideas about the nature of knowledge, politics and activism are

intrinsically interconnected. By focusing on e-learning, I was able to *compare* Islamic classes across different institutes with relative ease and in a sufficiently systematic fashion.

Islamic e-learning is part of a wider trend that has become particularly notable with the growth of MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses). MOOCs allow people to take free higher education courses on a wide range of subjects from renowned universities around the world. Even though MOOCs have been attended mostly by highly educated people in wealthy regions of the world, they are also thought to hold the potential to democratise and give access to high-quality education to disadvantaged communities around the world (Laurillard, 2016).

Given the digital developments in the field of higher education, it is unsurprising that Muslims have also been proactive in developing their own online Islamic education, from one-off courses to advanced Islamic studies programmes. This follows a long tradition of adopting new information and communication technologies to communicate Islam. However, while the research literature on MOOCs and online education is burgeoning, not much research has been done on Islamic e-learning. There is, however, a large body of literature that looks at how the Muslim political and social sphere changed with the advent of new media technologies. Most prominently, Eickelman and Anderson (2003), Hoffmann and Larsson (2014) and Nadeau (2015) have traced the development and impact of new media in the Muslim world. Others have focused more specifically on various manifestations of Internet Islam (Abdel-Fadil, 2011; Bunt, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2018; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009; Lawrence, 2002; Piela, 2013; Sati, 2009; Siapera, 2007; Sisler, 2007; Varisco, 2010; Warf, 2010).

One of the most cogent arguments regarding Muslim new media is the idea that a new class of secularly educated "lay" Muslims have gained increasing unmediated access to and interpretation of Islamic texts with unprecedented independence from traditional scholarly authority. These "lay" Muslims, for

whom it is no longer unusual to access and explain Islamic primary texts independently of scholars, are likely to have no classical training in traditional Islamic sciences (Siapera, 2007). Islamic e-learning represents an attempt by Muslims to develop institutions that provide foundational Islamic learning opportunities to large audiences. These online institutes promise "traditional" or "authentic" knowledge, from the foundations of belief and practice to more specialised subjects, for those who wish to continue.

Online Islamic learning attempts to bring Islamic religious heritage (in its many forms) to the contemporary world. It is one of many aspects of a broader educational landscape of Islamic educational provision for Muslims, which includes, for example, centres that offer face-to-face part-time and full-time courses and intensive retreats. Islamic e-learning is also a result of an organic progression and merging of different "Islamic" web services, such as repositories of Islamic legal rulings (*fatāwā*), Q&As and Islamic forums. These online spaces, among other things, provide Muslims with opportunities to submit questions to scholars who live outside their local communities. In this way, charismatic scholars acquire fame while strengthening a sense of community at a transnational level. The provision of these services has been fundamental for the ideation of (more or less) structured and interactive education spaces that are run by instructors who have received a mixture of Islamic and secular education.

Throughout this study, I have kept my anthropologist's hat on while effectively also being a Muslim student learning online like other students. I often reflected on this double identity and how my experience as a researcher differed to my past learning experiences as a "simple" student. In fact, this study is perhaps the result of my inability to separate my personal pursuit of an Islamic education from the anthropological contexts that surround the many different forms it takes. Knowledge of Islamic traditions cannot be acquired without considering the people who are interpreting it, the reasons why they are interpreting it in a certain way, their target audience, the groups that sustain them, and the Islamic

orientations and wider ideologies that they are supporting or condemning. In short, a study of Islamic education must consider authority and the hermeneutics of religious texts.

Like a student, I was interested in acquiring the knowledge provided by the teachers and fellow students during discussions. Contrary to a student, however, I maintained some distance from the community I was involved in and, as a researcher, I did not actively adopt or contribute to the community's views and practices. Being able to change my "hat" from student to anthropologist at times was useful. In the forums or online lessons, students sometimes asked how they should understand, cope with and act upon issues affecting them. They asked, for example, how to respond to and engage with anti-Islamic rhetoric or political or social campaigns they came across in their daily life. Putting on the anthropological hat meant I could let go of the sense of urgency and feeling of anxiety that involves trying to find the one Islamically correct answer to follow. I could let go of the feeling that my faith or identity was at stake. Anthropological research promotes critical reflection on the diversity of views and approaches to Islam that exist without the pressure to choose which interpretation is most authentic, which evidence is strongest, which opinions are the most correct and which side one should take.

The present study analyses the interpretative strategies used by two Islamic e-learning instructors within their respective Islamic online contexts to extrapolate civic and political ideas. By interpretative strategies, I mean all those techniques employed by the instructors to develop their epistemological positions (e.g their opinions on valid sources of knowledge, critical thinking, research methods, status of scholars and purpose of learning) and their civic and political ideas. I explore how instructors explained critical thinking and the place it should or should not have within Islamic education. As Irfan Ahmad (2017) shows in his book on *Religion as Critique*, the idea that critique is unique to the Western tradition stems from colonial assumptions of superiority that must be unpacked by looking at other forms of critique. Also in academia, multiple types of

criticality uphold different ideas regarding the purpose of education. Criticality can be limited to a particular discipline and instrumental to a particular job, or it can be understood as a civic skill, emancipatory and justice-oriented, geared towards critical self-reflection and/or critical action and social change (Johnston, Ford, & Myles, 2011). In this research, I try to draw a picture of the modes of critique used by the instructors alongside the civic and political messages they impart in the lessons on the life of the Prophet.

In Chapter 2, I look at the literature that has informed this interdisciplinary study, which I divide roughly into four distinct but overlapping topics. Firstly, the anthropology of Islam, as defined by Asad (1986) and then critiqued by others (Shahab Ahmed, 2017; Bowen, 2012; Schielke, 2010), represents the theoretical framework within which I begin exploring "lived Islam", that is, the social experiences of Muslims and the many different ways these relate (or do not relate) to their religious texts. Secondly, the literature on Muslim education (its intellectual roots and manifestations) is an intuitive home for this research study; some key works, such as Moosa (2015), Sahin (2013), Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) and the impressive collection edited by Abbas (2011), have been particularly useful in tracing the wider context in which Islamic e-learning can be placed as a new formulation of traditional and modern forms of Islamic education. Thirdly, research on Muslim new media, as mentioned previously, represents the "e" in e-learning. The study of Islam online, as I will show, seeks to understand the impact that new information and communication technologies have had on how Muslims organise themselves, interpret Islam and understand authority (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005). Fourthly, this study also sits partly within the field of political science and offers a contribution to it because it explores how political ideas are constructed (and how they relate to the epistemological and methodological choices of the instructors) by members of these online communities.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology applied to this study. This is essentially a comparative case study founded on constructivist principles that

uses virtual ethnographic methods to understand a complex, difficult to observe reality. By constructivist principles, I mean that it is not possible to claim objective knowledge of the research subject, rather the goal is to explore my experience of this kind of online educational provision in a transparent way in order to contribute to our understanding of these social realities. I provide a description and analysis of the lesson material and explain how I selected the data and why. In Chapter 3, I also describe the research journey and the ethical issues that I have faced as I gathered online material for research purposes. For those who belong to these online worlds, some descriptions and voices may be familiar, even though I have made every effort to modify names and identifiable information from the data that I have reported.

In Chapter 4, I provide a brief overview of themes generated during the initial phase of thematic analysis and a description of the online classes that I attended, for example, the audiences that the instructors addressed and the materials and sources used in the classroom.

In Chapter 5, I categorise the interpretative practices employed by the instructors. I look at the different types of “lessons” that were extracted from the biography of the Prophet and in particular the strategies that were used to justify when a particular instance in the Prophet’s life should apply (or not) to Muslims today.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the epistemological and methodological concerns that the instructors convey in the classes, especially during the introductory sessions to the *sīra*. Here, I look at the instructors’ preoccupations with raising the status of traditional Islamic research methods (mainly the way Muslims have transmitted traditions) so that they can exist on a level playing field with modern fields of inquiry.

In Chapters 7 and 8, I explore how the notion of civic and political engagement was discussed in the online classes. These chapters discuss the efforts of the online instructors to frame the mission of the Prophet in terms of upholding rights or seeking justice and contest modern forms of activism while

encouraging Muslims to be constructive members of the societies where they live. Furthermore, this chapter describes how the instructors seek to revive "Islamic" or "traditional" forms of activism, which were conceptualised as daʿwa (teaching about Islam) and *ʿibāda* (open and public worship and service to the community).

Finally, in Chapter 9, I focus on how the instructors discussed the concepts of the nation state, democracy and leadership. Here, I make some comparisons between the instructors' political ideas, especially their critique of modern political ideologies – both Western and Islamic – and conclude with some reflections on the relevance of the two case studies presented in this thesis to the wider social movement landscape.

In this thesis, I have come to understand Islamic e-learning as an effort to address several preoccupations. The first preoccupation refers to an ever-present threat of losing Islam because of the Muslim community's state of "weakness" in contemporary society – sometimes attributed to colonialism and Western hegemony. Education therefore becomes an important way to inspire a sense of religiosity in Muslims and to contribute to the "religification" of life. Education can be a means to make Islam a central "identity attribute" that can be used in everyday public life (Panjwani, 2017).

A second preoccupation was the perceived need to provide a response to negative portrayals of Islam in the media and the public domain more broadly. The online instructors were similar in that they both contested, in their own ways, Western forms of political and cultural hegemony and Islamophobic discourse. Their answer to anti-Islamic discourse was for Muslims to be productive members of society. For the instructors, Muslim engagement in wider society was a form of *daʿwa*, a way to strengthen the Muslim community and bring about social and political change by engaging in virtuous behaviour in everyday life.

A third preoccupation was the need to create alternative intellectual spaces to revive Islamic scholarship. The instructors raised the status of Islamic

methodologies while challenging the idea that Western academia represents the apex of science and intellectual rigour. As I will show throughout the thesis, the discourses of the instructors often link the methodology of knowledge acquisition and social change, with the former informing the latter. In their talks, the instructors talked about the social and political position of "weakness" of Muslims and articulated the need to create higher education institutions to teach Islamic methodologies that, in turn, will strengthen the Muslim community's ability to affect social change.

The idea that education is the main source of civic and political reform is not new. Since the 20th century, education has increasingly played a critical role as a catalyst for change and Islamic revival for Islamic activists such as Mawdudi (Nasr, 1996) and Hasan al-Banna (Rosen, 2008), often in response to European hegemony and colonialism. Similarly, the instructor expressed the need, in the long run, for a process of mental and/or physical separation from Western lifestyle and culture. This mental or physical separation is defined with the term *hijra*, which is the migration of Prophet Muhammad away from his oppressors to establish a new community. I interpret the instructor's use of the term *hijra* as a form of decolonisation.

The development of Islamic e-learning institutes not only fulfils the need for accessible Islamic education but makes a political statement that Islamic education should have the same status as Western education and grow in its own unique way. At different points in this thesis, I highlight some similarities and differences between the anti-hegemonic narratives I heard in the online classroom and decolonial ideas. Decolonising education entails dismantling the claim that Western knowledge is universal and all other knowledge systems are marginal folk or cultural specialities. Decolonial theory does not reject Western forms of knowledge/rationality outright, rather it wishes to provincialize them. It is based on the principle that all knowledge is necessarily located in a specific place and time (Andreotti, 2011). This thesis investigates how epistemological positions on history, culture, authenticity, universalism and diversity translate

into political considerations in the online Islamic classroom. Islamic education represents an attempt to carve a space for the exploration of the body of knowledge and methodologies that Muslims call “Islam” in a westernised world.

PART ONE: LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1: Research Questions, Definitions and Theoretical Considerations

1.1 The research questions

This study investigates the interpretative strategies employed by two Islamic instructors to talk about epistemology (how we acquire knowledge, what is "valid" knowledge), activism (how we shape society) and politics (how we make decisions) at two e-learning institutes. It focuses on how these three issues intersect in the discourses of the instructors. This thesis is an attempt to capture the hermeneutic processes – how the methodological issues that govern the interpretation of Islamic traditions shape political thought. The research questions of this study are as follows:

- Which epistemological principles and interpretative practices are professed and employed in the formulation of political and civic discourse in the online classrooms observed?
- How are political and civic concepts, in particular the ideas of "activism" and the "state", conveyed, if at all, in the *sīra* classes observed?
- How do these findings relate to the wider sociopolitical contexts of the classes?

In this study, I conducted a period of "virtual fieldwork" (more about this in Chapter 3) at two Islamic institutes that provide adult Islamic classes online (Islamic e-learning). As an additional comparative element, I have occasionally referred to the classes of the *sīra* that I observed – also as part of my fieldwork – at institute C, a mainstream secular institute that runs an Islamic studies programme.

The two online institutes are defined here as privately funded or charitable organisations dedicated to the provision of online non-formal adult education. These institutes teach Muslims primarily about Islam, its tenets and its norms of conduct. These e-learning institutes are usually transnational, which means the participation of both students and instructors is not confined within national borders.

This work is an interdisciplinary study at the crossroads between the anthropology of Islam, political theory and media studies. Table 1 shows a visual outline of this research. At the top of the table is the theoretical background – the anthropology of Islam. The anthropology of Islam was influenced significantly by Asad's conceptualisation of Islam as a "discursive tradition" in an attempt to reconcile text-based studies of Islam with anthropological explorations of Islam as a "lived" tradition, i.e., how Muslims live religion in all of the complexities of ordinary and not-so ordinary life (Asad 1986; Bowen 2012). Asad's notion of a "discursive tradition" generated debates and disagreement on what should be considered the most suitable definition of Islam. Many studies on Islamic discourse today focus on the effects of modernity on the reading of religious texts; they are concerned with tracing how intellectual movements are influenced by modernity.

With the "turn" to modernity, a complex combination of political, economic and sociocultural factors led to changes to the makeup of religious authority, the methods of interpretation, and Muslim identity and belonging. It also led to the creation of modern social movements, be they secularist, nationalist or Islamic. Radical changes in state power and the introduction of modern secular mass education at the turn of the 19th century were instrumental to this process. One example of this phenomenon is vividly described by Starrett (1998) in his study of the Egyptian school system and Islamic education. In the table, one step below "Intellectual trends", I include both the social movements and hermeneutics because they go hand in hand.

Against the backdrop of these wider debates on Islam and modernity sits the more specific field of Muslim education. The literature on Islamic education is vast and multifaceted. It includes historical accounts of Muslim education in early Islam (Berkey, 2014; Gilliot, 2017; Makdisi, 1981) and of the development of mass education in Muslim-majority contexts (Saqib, 1983; Tibawi, 1972).
In the social sciences, there are also studies that look at Islamic education in schools and higher education, such as madrasas and Islamic universities in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts (Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Moosa, 2015; Sakurai & Adelkhah, 2011; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Tan, 2008; Wheeler, 2002). Within the study of Muslim education, there are also pedagogic and philosophical discussions on the role of critical thinking and the development of inclusive and pluralistic approaches to Islamic education (Panjwani, 2004; Sahin, 2013; Waghid, 2011). Browsing through this literature really shows the sheer diversity of educational contexts and perspectives that can be adopted to study Muslim education. Yet, despite its breadth, little is known about online Islamic education from both a sociological and a curricular perspective. This study seeks to address this gap in knowledge.

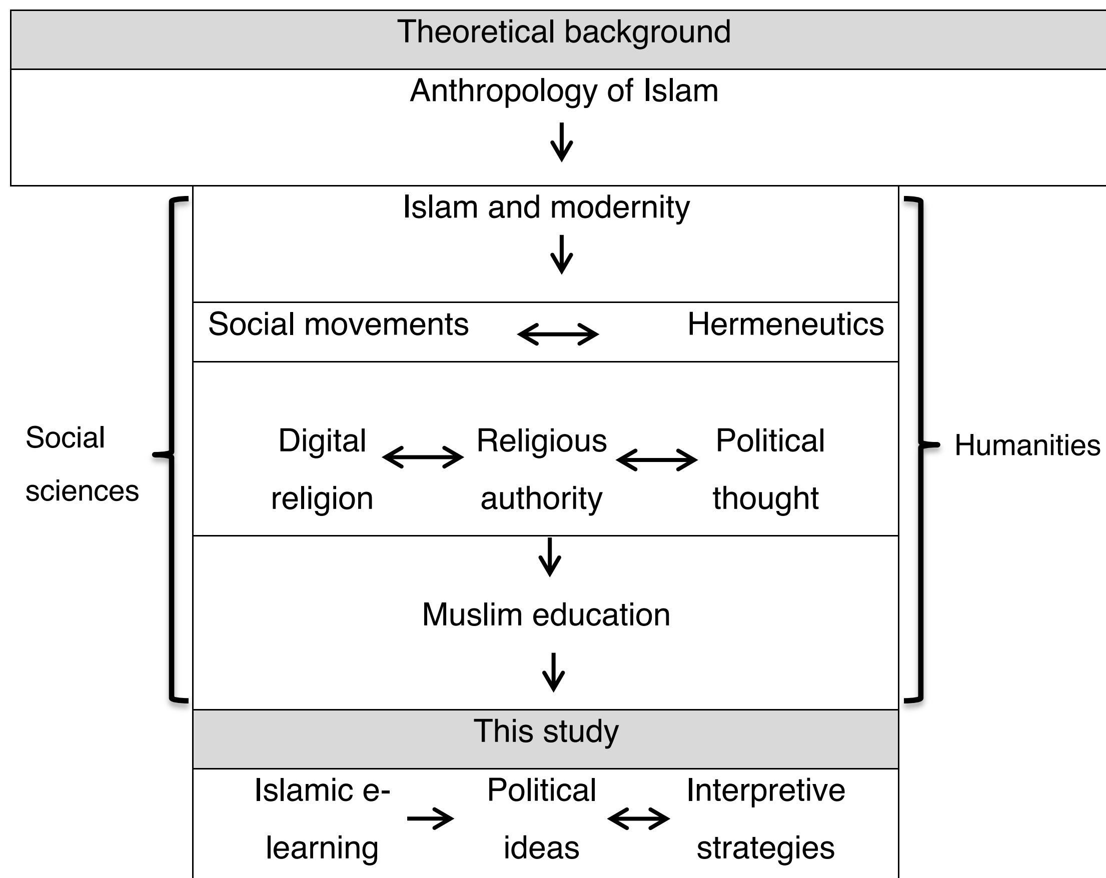

TABLE 1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY

1.2 Defining Islamic/Muslim education

This study defines "Islamic education" as the teaching that is done by Muslims primarily for Muslims for the aim of increasing understanding of any topic that is considered "Islamic" by community members. Islamic education can include subjects traditionally associated with Islamic disciplines (theology, jurisprudence) as well as secular subjects revisited through an Islamic lens (i.e. "Islamised"). In principle, Islamic education is said to be "holistic" in the sense that knowledge (*ʿilm*) is accompanied by norms of conduct (*adab*) and moral

education (*tarbiya*) (al-Attas, 1979; Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). The focus on socialisation, conduct and moral education highlights the importance of preparing students for wider society (and for the afterlife).

From now on, I differentiate between the definition of Islamic education provided above and all other possible manifestations of Muslim education, from the strictly religious to the secular or any kind of possible combination of both. There is also a wider debate on the meaning of the word "Islamic" in Islamic education, one argument being that all education by Muslims should be considered "Muslim education", rather than "Islamic", in order to acknowledge the heterogeneity of experiences and discrepancies in beliefs and practices found within and across Muslim communities. This is because using the term "Islamic" involves a degree of solidification (or normativisation) around a set of truths (Davids & Waghid, 2014; Douglass & Shaikh, 2004; Panjwani, 2004).

Online organisations dedicated to teaching about Islam can take different names, such as "institute", "college", "academy" or "university". Because some offer flexible, informal education while others are more structured (i.e. four-year programmes), it is difficult to find a term that encompasses them all. One of the closest definitions can be taken from Shah (2019), who discussed various definitions of religious training in the British Muslim context. He defined the whole range of educational options available (from traditional Islamic training to hybrid forms that include formal academic qualifications) as "Muslim Higher Education and Training Institutions" (or METIs for short). Because much of the Islamic e-learning that takes place is of an informal nature and varies enormously in terms of level of study, I would swap "higher education" for "adult education". "Higher education" includes an expectation of provision of advanced level courses, which is not always the case for Islamic e-learning. Adult education is more inclusively defined as "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 2011).

1.3 Defining activism, civic engagement, governance and the state

Adler and Goggin (2005) provide a useful classification called the "Continuum of Civic Engagement": in this continuum, they include both community and political activities at various levels of involvement, from "informal private individual action" (such as helping a neighbour, contributing to a charity, engaging in a political discussion and voting) to formal/public collective action (such as occasional or sustained volunteering/service, active participation in a political party, participating in protests and running for office). They further provide some guidelines to categorise "intensity of volunteering" and nineteen core indicators of engagement.

From here onwards, I also adopt the broad definition of civic life as "all social spheres beyond the family, from neighbourhoods and local communities to state, national, and cross-national arenas" (Ehrlich, 2000, p. XXV) and civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities" (ibid: Vi). By political engagement or activism, I mean the "articulation of demands and interests with the goal of influencing political decisions" (Zimenkova, 2013, p. 171), where "political" refers to topics of public interest on which there is some degree of "controversy" (Zimenkova & Hedtke, 2013, p. 7).

On occasion, I also use the term "citizenship", which I do not however necessarily use in terms of "status" (e.g., having rights and responsibilities) or "identity", but rather I refer to it as the act of behaving civically in one's space. In this sense, I adopt Starkey and Osler's definition of citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2005), which acknowledges multiple dimensions on citizenship, one of which is citizenship "as practice". This means that citizenship is not simply a formal status that depends on being a member of a particular nation state. "Citizenship as practice" also does not mean conducting a particular set of activities (leafleting for a particular party) but engaging in the democratic

process in a wide variety of creative ways. The point of this study is to expand this definition of "citizenship" to include many "non-formalised" ways in which individuals and communities understand and practise citizenship and engage with the "political", even perhaps through community education online. As I will show, the data set demonstrates that this is indeed the case. These definitions will change considerably over the course of the research journey as I follow a "grounded theory" approach that privileges theory-building grounded in data over theories of academic origin.

1.4 Theoretical considerations: the anthropology of Islam

Émilie Roy (2012) in her thesis on Islamic education in Mali offers a helpful and clear summary of the various ways in which "Islam" has been defined by different anthropologists. To begin with, Clifford Geertz in his comparative work *Islam Observed* (1971), treats Islam as a core set of symbols/beliefs, which reside in the orthodoxy (great tradition, or the essence) of the scholars with a degree of cultural variability found in mystical practices (little traditions, or local cultural practices). Eickelman (2002) agrees that there is a "core" or "essence" of Islam manifested in a "set of principles" from which all local practices derive, but dismisses the usefulness of comparing great with little traditions.

However, for el-Zein (1977), al-Azmeh (1993) and Varisco (2005), for example, there is not a normative Islam or an "essence" to Islam at all, rather only many "islams". This view emphasises the mediation of reason in the process of extracting meaning from texts, the "mutability", pragmatism and decentralisation of Islamic legal practice, and the historical and regional variety of Islamic religious experience that exist across the world (al-Azmeh 1993). This view is a response to orientalist and anti-Islamic narratives that frame Muslim behaviour as having no agency, as if Muslims are a direct manifestation of scripture and Islamic ideologues who claim the existence of a universal, explicit,

fixed body of law called Islam. For Asad (1986), Islam is a discursive tradition carried forward by specific historical actors and mediated by political forces with vested interest in the "production of appropriate knowledges". Bowen's (2012) position is similar to Asad because it gives special importance to the dialectic relationship between readings of texts (the universalising/normative) and influences of local cultures in the ongoing formation of "lived" local religious practices.

As I will show in the methodology chapter (see Chapter 3), this study focuses on the hermeneutic process that takes place in the classroom rather than on the wider sociological dynamics of e-learning. This investigation therefore relies extensively on the concept of "interpretative practices" (Bowen, 2012), which are defined as those dynamics and techniques that shape the interaction between texts and individual interpretations, often mediated by religious authorities. This definition draws directly from an anthropological tradition that defines Islam as "a set of interpretative resources and practices" (Bowen 2012: 3). In *A New Anthropology of Islam*, Bowen advocates for a multidisciplinary methodology that looks at "religious texts and ideas … as they are understood and transmitted in particular times and places" (Bowen 2012: 4). The overall importance of this point is expressed succinctly by Schielke:

> The turn to look at creed as a discursive tradition offered an important step forward by focusing our attention to the fact that religion is not about gods, books or institutions, but about the ways people worship gods, read books, and act in institutions. (Schielke, 2010, pp. 9-10)

This shift in understanding the dynamics of textual interpretation has had an impact in the Islamic study of Islam. Suleiman and Shihadeh (2007) explain that some academics, for example, favour the integration of the social sciences in Islamic studies to illustrate the complexity and variety of contemporary "lived" textual interpretations. Bowen neither dismisses the study of "high texts" (as in traditional theology) nor does away with the analysis of distinctive features of different Muslim societies (the traditional focus of anthropology).

Bowen's approach to Islamic traditions is characterised by a multidisciplinary dimension "that takes seriously both religious thinking and social frameworks" (Bowen 2012: 7). Examples of this dialectic can be found in the first chapter of Bowen's monograph (ibid), which, not accidentally, is dedicated to learning. Here, a particular Qurʾanic verse is explored first through a textual analysis, then using ethnographic accounts of contemporary ritual practices associated with that same verse.

I do not claim, however, that this dialectic approach between textual interpretations and lived experience can work in all Muslim contexts. Not all Muslims engage in religious experiences that are bound by a narrow definition of "sacred texts". At the beginning of this research process, I assumed that the idea of "interpretative practices" would be central in the context of Islamic education. Education, I thought, was clearly an ideal setting to explore both the people who do the interpreting and the texts from which the interpretations derive.

As I have come to realise during the fieldwork experience, in particular the classes I chose to follow (i.e., the *sīra*), texts of any kind were peripheral or nearly non-existent in the whole learning experience. The narration of traditions related to the *sīra* relied on the instructors' vivid oral descriptions. The lectures also featured a great deal of social commentary. Only occasionally, references were made to the books where these traditions could be read. The "sources" of the *sīra* were only outlined in an overview in the first lesson. By contrast, other courses from the same institutes focused on the commentary of specific texts, such as *ḥadīth* (collections of the sayings attributed to the Prophet) or famous treatises on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and belief. In the two *sīra* courses, reading books was an optional activity to be undertaken in the students' own time.

As I will discuss in Chapter 3, this thesis regards the internet as a social space with educational potential, especially in the sense that it hosts communities of practice. In today's world, people increasingly connect with others based on

their interests in addition to the relationships that they may build due to physical proximity with other people (e.g. neighbours). The idea of meeting and organising online is widespread across all human interests. Whatever specific interest one may have, there is likely to be a group of people out there talking about it online. Talking about religion online is one such interest that is not unique to the Muslim community, but shared with many other mainstream religious groups and new religious movements (Campbell, 2012; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005).

When talking about Muslim communities, researchers emphasise the diversity of human experience in order to resist the tendency to overemphasise orthodoxy (Fattah & Butterfield, 2006; Toğuşlu & Leman, 2014). Against the tendency to understand religious practice exclusively in relation to the "high texts" (discursive tradition), Ahmed (2015) makes a compelling case to explain the diversity of manifestations of being "Islamic" across vast geographical areas and historical periods. He understands Islam as a complex/vocabulary of experiences and knowledge(s) that cut across different literary and artistic forms and which exist beyond prescriptive legal and creedal matters. In response to mainstream forms of Salafi-puritanical Islam, Shahab Ahmed (2017) wants to show that many non-normative, non-legalistic elements (wine-drinking, mysticism, philosophy, homoeroticism) that have been present in Muslim culture over the centuries do not exist *despite* Islam but rather exist and have acquired meaning among Muslims *through* Islam. In the words of Knight:

> The Islamic story of power will say, "Love it or leave it," as though the Islamic story of power is the only Islam, and anyone wanting to wear the title of "Muslim" has to step through its gate. Beneath or beyond this absolutism, Islam has always been home to misfits, freaks and queers. So … Islam has a 'counter-Islamic' legacy that is fully "Islamic". (Knight, 2013, p. 22)

This Islamic complex/vocabulary consists of all explorations of the meanings of Islam through a vast range of social and creative activities, which also include entertainment, humour, arts and music. Ahmed suggests understanding Islam

in terms of hermeneutical engagement with the Text of Revelation (Qurʾan) as well as the Pre-Text and Con-Text of Revelation. By "Pre-Text", Ahmed means the empirical/experiential exploration of the world and nature (The Book of Nature) as a "source of revealed truth" prior to the revealed Text. This includes activities such as the natural sciences, philosophy, and the experiential engagement with the divine of mystics. The "Con-Text" is the full gamut of human activity, in all its variety, contradictions and ongoing developments that have occurred as a result of engagement with the "Text of Revelation" (Shahab Ahmed, 2017). This thesis applies Ahmed's framework in the sense that it tentatively defines the work of the online instructors as a hermeneutical engagement with the Text and the Con-Texts of modernity in order to seek a normative ideal.

I also use an elaboration of the notion of "discursive tradition" in terms of "grand schemes" (Schielke, 2010). The idea is that multiple grand schemes inform our belief systems and practice, Islam being only one of them. Schielke (2010) goes beyond religion alone. He explains that many grand schemes, such as human rights, anthropology, Marxism and many other ideas people use to understand the world can also be considered "discursive traditions". These grand schemes are numerous and include:

> Commitment to Islam, romantic love, capitalist wealth and consumption, education and social mobility, development and modernization and nationalist, pan-Arabic and pan-Islamist politics, to name just a few. (Schielke 2010: 14)

Contemporary societies host multiple, coexisting, competing, overlapping and contradictory discursive traditions. Treating Islam as a separate entity, unique or different from other grand schemes, bolsters the arguments made explicitly (but often implicitly too) by some Muslims (as well as critics of Islam) who interpret Islam as requiring strict adherence to supposedly "clear-cut" rules extracted verbatim from Islamic texts (Qurʾan, traditions, early books of jurisprudence) – without any consideration for the multiplicity of dimensions,

interpretations and influences that exist prior to, around and as a result of revelation. Schielke talks about how grand schemes inform our ordinary life and invites us to identify how "the world" is represented from the perspective of particular interests, i.e. the various ideologies that influence discourse at any particular point in time. This point will be discussed further in Chapter 3 when I discuss critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995).

In his critique of Asad's concept of "discursive tradition", Schielke describes how in his fieldwork he found that people in their daily life dwelled among and fluctuated between different "grand schemes". At times people might embrace and become infatuated with one grand scheme over another (he compares for example two people who embraced Salafism and communism respectively in order to find ready-made solutions for their everyday lives), yet stressed that these "grand schemes can never be accounted for alone" (Schielke, 2010, p. 14).

Schielke acknowledges that Islam and capitalism are qualitatively different "discursive traditions"; however, living Islam, as he puts it, "may not be so dramatically different from the ways people live capitalism and love" (ibid: 14).

In this thesis, while my instructors rejected the possibility that their accounts might be inspired by grand schemes other than Islam, I show that there are a number of grand schemes (e.g. democracy, colonialism, work ethics) that the instructors deal with. This does not mean that I do not take seriously the instructors' attempts to divulge "authentic" normative Islam, but simply that (i) in the process of searching for authenticity, multiple contemporary ideas and contexts (grand schemes) influence the instructors' vocabulary and (ii) the instructors' engagement with Islamic Texts in turn gives new meanings to these grand schemes, combining and reshaping all of them, including Islam. The many Islamic educational organisations that exist now online form part of a process of "reawakening" of Islamic scholarship while necessarily wrestling multiple narratives, including those that portray Islam as inimical and regressive. These educational institutions exist partly to create spaces where

ideas can be developed independently of the influence of Anglo-American or western(ised) culture.

This study is built on the premise that the epistemological and methodological principles that we adopt play a leading role in the formation of political ideas. This means that the way knowledge is organised and the methods that are considered suitable to acquire knowledge have political implications that should not be ignored. In this case, the way the body of Islamic knowledge is placed among other forms of knowledge has political implications, it represents the status that Muslims have in wider society.

Emon (2019) argues that the construction of meaning around adjectives like “Islamic” and “Muslim” are used to either promote or challenge particular narratives and practices of state governance. He provides a variety of examples from North America to the Middle East to show how different methodological approaches and academic and popular narratives about Islam are used selectively and ambivalently for specific state purposes. For example, in North America certain tropes (religious bigotry, patriarchy) are used as “neutral proxies” to describe the “Islamic” and thus justify the securitisation and surveillance of Muslim communities. In some Muslim-majority countries, like Saudi Arabia, the “Islamic” is deployed at certain levels of society to appease conservative audiences, while the same conservative “Islamic” values are silently compromised in other areas of life to align with international practice (for example, insurance is often considered impermissible yet widely used to attract international investment in the country) (Emon, 2019).

In these examples there are two important methodological approaches that contribute to the construction of the “Islamic”, which I have already discussed above: first, there is the positivist approach in philology and history where the text is the primary object of research that determines what Islam is or is not and, second, there is the ethnographic approach that “decentres the text” (p. 388) in order to give primacy to the voice of Muslim subjects and their experiences. “Decentring the text”, of course, can also lead to less useful

results, for example, deciding that a case study is "representative" and therefore "generalisable" to other, or even all, Muslims. In short, researchers should pay attention to the methodological and epistemological choices that are made in the study of Islam and how the resulting definitions of "Islamic" are publicly deployed to support particular agendas.

1.5 Decolonising education

This thesis argues that the process of developing Islamic non-formal adult education online is a way of reviving, diversifying and decentralising Islamic centres of knowledge transmission and production. This, I propose, is a phenomenon that can be framed as a form of epistemic decolonisation (Quijano, 2007). Decolonial thought (and practice) presupposes that this process is ongoing and requires us to question the knowledge and modes of rationality that are widely considered "universal" and taken for granted. White European epistemology represents the foundation of the project of modernity, which in many ways is rooted in colonialism. Modern European colonialism played a central part in the formation of the social and epistemic hierarchy that shapes today's society. This process began towards the end of the 15th century with the termination of Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula and the beginning of the conquest of the Americas (Grosfoguel, 2013). Modern colonialism was influenced by a much earlier experience of European conquest during the crusades starting from the 11th century.

From this point onwards, the colonial project led to the development of theories that could justify the continued subjugation of people, be it because of their (lack of) "religion" (i.e. Christianity), or their ethnicity or their supposed inability to run their own affairs (e.g. absence of democracy). Over hundreds of years, European powers have perpetrated genocides (systematic killing of entire populations), epistemicides (destruction their cultures, knowledge, languages)

and the plunder of natural resources around the world leading to the concentration of knowledge/power/wealth in the hands of white European men. This colonial project creates systemic racial, religious and political hierarchies that are the intellectual basis of white supremacy. It persists in society through the systemic misrepresentation and perpetuation of stereotypes that fuel the invisibility of certain communities, such as Native American communities (Reclaiming Native Truth, 2018).

Decolonial thinking engages in a critique of enlightenment philosophy and European political theory (Maldonado-Torres, 2004; Mignolo, 2011) as it recognises the intrinsic link between the practice of colonialism and the idea of modernity, as well as the relationship between power and knowledge. It also involves historically colonised, diaspora and Indigenous communities critically engaging with and reaffirming their knowledge(s), languages, methodologies and ethics in the contemporary world. Decoloniality is a *process* that calls for ensuring that all local knowledges, including Western ones, engage on a level-playing field, through "critical border thinking":

> Critical border thinking is the epistemic response of the subaltern to the Eurocentric project of modernity. Instead of rejecting modernity to retreat into a fundamentalist absolutism, border epistemologies subsume/redefine the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity from the cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern, located in the oppressed and exploited side of the colonial difference, towards a decolonial liberation struggle for a world beyond eurocentered modernity. What border thinking produces is a redefinition/subsumption of citizenship, democracy, human rights, humanity, and economic relations beyond the narrow definitions imposed by European modernity. (Grosfoguel, 2011 n.p.).

Decolonial practice is counter-hegemonic, it is about creating a pluriversal world where human beings can explore their heritages and knowledge(s) on truly equal terms.

There are various examples of engagement with decolonial and critical theory in Muslim contexts. One example is the development of the field of Critical Muslim Studies, which commits to an open-ended critique of eurocentrism and orientalism (Sayyid, 2014). Decolonial theory is closely related to Christian

liberation theology; both of them have influenced Muslim intellectuals to engage with social justice readings of Islam. Rahemtulla (2017) argues that Muslim liberation theology needs to find its own voice because many theological issues raised by liberation theologians are characteristically Christian in focus. A similar process is taking place with Muslim intellectuals interested in developing decolonial Muslim thought, in the form of critical engagement with European paradigms and the idea of "pluriversality" informed by Islamic perspectives. One example is the theorisation of Islam as inherently counter-hegemonic because of the principle of *tawḥīd* (oneness) in Islam, which is the claim that no ultimate power or authority can rest in human beings (S. M. Ali, 2016). In this view, only God has supreme power and authority, therefore any form of supremacism is a result of people raising themselves to the status of gods (which would be considered a grave sin by most Muslims). This argument purports that an Islamic understanding of pluriversality involves acknowledging that the counter-hegemonic, "revolutionary" potential of Islam must be put in the service of all oppressed people.

At different points in this thesis, I highlight similar ideas that were presented in the online lectures during fieldwork, for example the idea that Islam means standing up for all oppressed people. Whenever relevant, I highlight discrepancies or make connections with existing decolonial literature. There are significant differences between explicit engagement with decolonial theory by Muslim intellectuals, such as the examples I just described, and the narratives of the instructors in my research fields. I suggest that the Islamic online education that I observed engages in decolonisation only insofar as it is working to develop and revive Islamic knowledge against Western hegemonic practice. Not only do the lectures of the two instructors not explicitly make mention of decoloniality, but they fail to engage with the concept of pluriversality by reinforcing the dichotomy between Islam and the West, which in some cases meant producing supremacist narratives interspersed with cosmopolitan and democratic values.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the research questions and the fields of study that have helped inform this research. The anthropology of Islam functions as the backdrop of my research, especially the various attempts to understand the dialectics between modern and premodern, between the study of texts (oral and written) and lived experience and between hermeneutics and authority. I also offered a few reflections on definitions of key terms used in this study, in particular the different connotations that the word "Islamic" and "Muslim" take when associated with education (or history and society) and the importance of using plurals to describe Muslim perspectives and experiences of the world and Islam itself. In terms of definitions, I discussed the usefulness, and sometimes inadequacy, of relying on the theory behind concepts such as civic engagement.

I also considered the theoretical pursuit of a comprehensive definition of "Islam", which is often driven by a critique of deterministic and "legalistic-normative" narratives about Islamic practice that are common in some Muslim and anti-Muslim narratives. I suggested that the "Islamic" is often "deployed" instrumentally to obtain political goals and in aid of particular narratives of state governance. I ended this chapter with a brief overview of decolonial theory to explain how the practice of developing independent institutes of learning ties in with the idea of decolonising education, and academic centres of learning in particular. Decolonial theorists and practitioners are involved in a process of delinking, decentring and localising the production of knowledge in a struggle against systematic "epistemicide", that is, the eradication of knowledges, heritages, languages, ethics and epistemologies in the Majority World. The narratives of Muslim decolonial activists and the Islamic e-learning instructors share common concerns regarding the need to decolonise, or "delink", from

Western paradigms, which as I will explain later, the instructors frame in terms of "*hijra*". However, their critical engagement with other traditions and Western paradigms is qualitatively different.

Chapter 2: Mapping the Field

In this chapter, I offer an overview of the research literature of the three interconnected areas of study on which this research is based: (i) Muslim responses to modern education, (ii) Islam and new media, and (iii) the theory and practice of citizenship education in Muslim contexts. I also look at three key elements of this study and review some of the literature for each of these areas. I first look at interpretative approaches for each of the major Islamic orientations in Sunni Islam today with particular attention to how these orientations have developed as an educational response to colonialism and modernity. Secondly, I look at new media technologies and offer an overview of the debates on the impact these have had on Muslim authority and Islamic learning. Finally, I look at political engagement and the role that education plays in reproducing different typologies of activism and citizenship in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts.

2.1 Islamic orientations and responses to modern education

Mass education, as most people know it today, has its roots in post-industrial Europe. From the mid-18th century, this type of education became a de facto template imposed in many parts of the world by European colonialists. Mass education arrived in Muslim-majority countries through European colonialism and then continued to develop in each context after independence.
At the same time, often as a direct reaction to colonisation and westernisation, traditional Islamic education developed in the Muslim world through alliances and fissures of different Islamic trends and movements, resulting in different combinations of secular, humanistic, theological and legal curricular content (Hashim, Rufai, & Nor, 2011; Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Muborakshoeva, 2013; Reetz, 2010; Sikand, 2005; van Bruinessen, 2008). In the early 19th century,

Muslim countries such as Egypt and Turkey underwent economic, military and educational modernisation with the goal of "catching up" with the progress achieved in the West (Eickelman, 1978; Muborakshoeva, 2013). For decades, countries have had to deal with the notion of "underdevelopment", of having to "modernise" or "catch up" with the Euro-American social and economic development model (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003) and if not, they had to think about what kind of alternative models could be used in an extremely interdependent economic system. The debate on modernisation has been ongoing since the 1830s, if not earlier, in different places around the globe. Shatz (1990), for example, talks about Russia in the 19th century in a way that may be familiar to many Muslims, if you substitute references to Russia with the word "Islamic" or other national or cultural affiliations:

> The intellectuals in Moscow were just beginning to divide into the two camps of "Westernisers", who believed Russia should follow the general course of political and social development already laid down by the west, and the "slavophiles", who believed Russia should build on her own native culture and institutions. (Shatz, 1990, p. xiii)

Many countries have faced a double pressure to follow the technological, social and economic pathway of the West and the challenge of establishing alternative pathways, often inspired by one's ethnic, cultural, and/or linguistic identity. The premise that neoliberal capitalism is the "model" to be reproduced across the world has been contested by national liberation, decolonisation and indigenous rights movements around the world and by the efforts of anti-globalisation movements (Ayres, 2004; Santos, 2013) and others actively seeking more just and sustainable alternatives to Western capitalism (Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, & Martinez-Alier, 2013; Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta, 2014).

The injustices committed in the past four hundred years have involved the institutional oppression and marginalisation of certain demographics (Majority World and colonised people, women and minority cultures and identity groups) alongside the plunder and destruction of lands and the suppression of

indigenous knowledge systems by colonial (European and neo-European) forces. Decolonial scholarship argues for the rediscovery and revival of disappearing knowledge systems. This is not an argument for a return to the past, rather it is an epistemic position against the universalism of the Western project – an attempt to assert its locatedness. It is the application of the statement that "all knowledge is local" and "particular" to specific contexts, including the foundational texts, the "classics" that are at the heart of European science and philosophy (Grosfoguel, 2007, 2013; Mignolo, 2012). The special status of European traditions over non-European ones distorts our understanding of the world and the geo-politics of knowledge and power.

Another reason why there are different responses to modernity has also to do with the fact that "modernity" has different political, social, intellectual and material dimensions. Modernisation can involve, for example, adopting certain technologies, teaching methods or learning experiences. Or it could entail adopting one or more of the overarching norms and values that guide social research and scientific inquiry. All these elements do not necessarily need to be adopted at the same time.

Modernity can also be understood as disillusionment with religion and the discovery of a newfound optimism, new ways to perceive time and space, and new expectations regarding this life and the afterlife. It could also be understood in terms of specific modes of critique, secularism and the freedom to question religious texts. Modernity therefore also involves a change in the purpose of education: from memorisation and the embodiment of religious or classical texts or reproduction of the status quo to knowledge production for the purpose of market growth or the betterment of worldly life through innovation. The fact that there are "multiple modernities" means that modernity does not come as a package, but rather it is creatively adapted, remixed, and revisited critically through traditions, depending on context-specific, socio-economic and political conditions (Schmidt, 2006).

As an illustration of different ways of understanding modernity and "modernising", Zaman (2007) explains that Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia are structurally and technically modern, for example, they organise the curriculum thematically on the model of the American system. However, like many other Islamic universities across the Muslim world, these universities have not made significant changes to their epistemological and methodological positions, particularly in terms of the type of criticality that is encouraged in the classroom (to understand society, the texts or the self). There are also traditional Islamic universities (*madrasas*) that combine both traditional and modern pedagogy, such as for example, Al-Qarawiyyin University, in Morocco (Sabki & Hardaker, 2013).

The subjects and methods of inquiry that are employed to research, the teaching techniques and the overall purpose that is given to education must therefore all be taken into account. Providing online education could mean embracing "modernity" in one or more of these ways. The Islamic e-learning institutes that I have observed have structured modules organised thematically that are almost identical to any course I attended at liberal secular universities in the UK, yet the principles that govern the content and the lessons are by no means the same as I describe in Chapter 4.

One example of this remixing of modernity with traditions is the "Islamisation of knowledge" project. This project often endorses new technologies and curricular structure of secular academia. Advocates of the "Islamisation of knowledge" emphasise, however, that there is a pressing need to integrate "Islamic" values, i.e. norms of conduct and belief, into the curriculum – something that is believed to be lacking in secular education (Memon, 2009). The Canadian founder of the Islamic Online University (now known as International Open University), Bilal Philips, is a prime example of this thinking. He adopts the blueprint of the modern university while working towards the integration of religious beliefs and rules in all secular subjects (Digital Mimbar, 2010, June 27).

Structurally, modern Islamic universities were developed as a means to bring about the Islamisation of society and to counter Western hegemony (Zaman, 2007). The idea that education should be a catalyst for social change contrasts with the traditional function of Islamic education as it was portrayed by Eickelman (1977) in his study of Morocco: the goal of traditional Islamic education was not to bring about change to the social order, but rather to maintain it. There were no expectations for men of learning to “constitute an ideological vanguard” (1977, p. 519).

In his study of education in Egypt, Starrett (1998) also noted this shift. He observed that Islam is increasingly rationalised and utilised to prompt social change as it had never been before. He called the phenomenon the “functionalisation” of Islam. In these contexts, traditional beliefs and practices acquire new political and social significance within an increasingly modern and secular public domain. And, importantly, the actors that control Islamic discourse change too, as I describe in the next section.

Education in Europe underwent a similar shift. At present, most people perceive education as a means for economic, technological and intellectual development. Modern mass schooling is expected to prepare young people to a career or otherwise become productive members of society, contributing to economic growth in the global market. Yet, this understanding is mainly a product of the industrial revolution, mass production and factory work. In a nutshell, it is the result of a radical change in how people understand the nature and purpose of “work”.

Muborakshoeva (2013) explains how traditional European higher education, similarly to traditional Islamic education, used to also primarily focus on memorising and transmitting classical and religious texts. The major events that demarcated the social and intellectual passage from premodernity to modernity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe - such as the technological advances of the industrial revolution - occurred outside academia. With the establishment of a new type of university driven by the

creation of “new knowledge” through research, the traditional Church-run university started to break away from traditional learning, and this did not occur without resistance from established religious institutions (ibid).

There are some differences between Muslim and Christian traditions. Whereas science and technology had to work their way into European academia, which was rooted in the study of the classics (Latin, Greek and Christian literature, and philosophy), the opposite was the case in the Muslim world. From the ninth century onwards, the natural sciences were instead able to develop mostly undisturbed among Muslims while a few influential literalist movements directed their hostility towards the Greek metaphysics and rationalist philosophies.

It is perhaps for this reason that historical-critical methodologies in the social sciences and humanities, which developed from a combination of scientific method, philosophy and literary criticism, found less fertile ground in the Muslim world. The opposition came from religious scholars especially when these methodologies were applied to Islamic hermeneutics (Abu Zayd, 2008; Rahman, 1982). The presence of these epistemological and methodological tensions is key to understanding the current discrepancies in contemporary Muslim education.

Classifications of Islamic orientations and approaches to education

Muslim responses to modern education differ in how the distinction between religious instruction and secular education (“educational dualism”) can be resolved (P. Anderson, Tan, & Suleiman, 2011; Hashim, 1996; Muborakshoeva, 2013; Tan, 2012). The rational (*ʿaql*) sciences (e.g. philosophy) and the “revealed” (*naqlī*) sciences (e.g. legal studies) have long been interconnected (El-Tobgui, 2019). Throughout the Medieval period until the present day, Muslim scholars and intellectuals have debated the role that reason should play in the interpretation of revelation (Ramadan, 2004). In more recent history, many Muslims have been grappling with how religious knowledge can be integrated with modern science, especially in areas where

there are perceived tensions, such is the case for evolutionary science (Edis, 2009). In terms of modern education, concerns with “whether Islamic schools should teach modern science, provide training in philosophy, as well as theology, or offer instruction in modern politics and citizenship” were being discussed in countries such as Egypt, India, Turkey and Iran two centuries ago (Hefner & Zaman, 2007, p. 3).

The main responses to modernity, i.e. the different positions taken in these debates, approximately align with the leading Islamic orientations present in the world today. Rostoványi succinctly pointed out that “in a metaphoric sense, the three Indian cities (and the institutions to which they are home), Ajmer, Deoband and Aligarh, express the different outlooks on the world implied in the three models” of education: the “mystical”, the “traditionalist” and the “modernist” (2014, p. 50).

Sadaalah (2004) divides contemporary Muslim thought into four orientations: secularism, traditionalism, modernism and fundamentalism. I have further adapted this classification based on a few additional sources (Brown, 2014; Duderija, 2011; Hamid, 2016; Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Ramadan, 2004; Reetz, 2010). Although classifications offer useful insight, reality is far more complex, blurred and dynamic. Islamic orientations often overlap (which means that there is dialogue between those professing to belong to one or another group) and are internally divided by nuanced differences of interpretation. In addition, culture, language and local contexts significantly influence these Islamic orientations.

2.1.1 Emulation and secular education

Secular orientations in Muslim contexts tend to wholeheartedly embrace secular values, meaning that the role of religion is confined exclusively to the private sphere. The best example of successful secularisation is Turkey at the turn of the 19th century under Atatürk. Secularists advocate for modern

education and either propose a total elimination of public religious education or delimit its scope to teaching religion as a sociohistorical phenomenon in a non-confessional context (Agai, 2007). Secularism is how many Muslims experience religious education in secular contexts around the world today. Secularism may at times emphasise universal rights and, at other times, prioritise nationalistic values, especially in citizenship education (Çayır & Gürkaynak, 2007).

2.1.2 Islamic modernism and Western academia

The main difference between secularists and modernists is that secularists wish to do away with religion in the public realm altogether, while modernists seek to critically assess a selection of Islamic textual sources in light of modern values and ideas. Brown describes Islamic modernism as a form of Islamic humanism characterised primarily by the rejection – or radical critique – of *ḥadīth* literature (the collections of sayings of the Prophet) as sources of religious or historical truth (Brown, 2014). He traces the origins of this movement back to Chirag Ali (1844-1895) in South Asia and the birth of the "Qurʾan-only" (or *ahl-e Qurʾan* or Qurʾanist) movement at the beginning of the 20th century.

Across the Muslim world, intellectuals who espouse Islamic modernism have focused on debunking the reliability of the *ḥadīth* corpus. These include Tawfiq Sidqi (1881-1920) in Egypt. In the most recent past, radical positions (away from the orthodox norm) on *ḥadīth* literature have been taken by feminist scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud, who hold that *ḥadīth* collections have been transmitted by men to reproduce legal narratives that maintain patriarchy. Another prominent position was taken by renowned neo-modernist intellectual Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) – and later Muhammad Shahrur (1938-2019) and Nasr Abu Zayd (1943-2010) – who argued that what was once intellectually dynamic Islamic scholarship now fixates on hair-splitting

details hair-splitting details and the implementation of particular rules at the expense of the search for overarching Islamic principles of ethics and justice. These intellectuals adopt a postmodern approach that focuses on the fluidity of language and construction of meaning in specific historical contexts.

This movement is particularly important because it adopts many of the concerns and methodologies of European post-modern intellectuals that have now become the new “classics” in the Western(ised) university (e.g. Foucault). Brown (2014) emphasises that Islamic modernists are the only group of scholars who have developed a truly novel approach to the study of the Qu’ran that remains controversial among Muslims and is mainly appreciated in Western academia. It has created a space where progressive Muslim academics can develop their research and express their ideas (to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the context).

Modernism is relevant to this study because it gives context to explain the positions of the two e-learning instructors as they critiqued the Western(ised) university and modernist approaches to the study of Islam.

2.1.2 Modernist Salafism and educational synthesis

Modernist Salafism (Brown, 2014) – which is also referred to as “classical modernism” (Duderija, 2011) and “Salafi reformism” (Ramadan, 2004) – can be traced back to the thought of Al-Afghani (1938-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1949- 1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935), and subsequently al-Banna (1906-1949) and the Muslim Brotherhood (Abu-Rabi, 1989; Sadaalah, 2004; Zeghal, 2007). These thinkers called for a return to, and for the re-interpretation of, the original Islamic textual sources, and they rejected strict adherence to one school of thought. They believed in the gradual implementation of an Islamic order through education and accepted that this would necessarily be influenced by the modern world (Abu-Rabi, 1989).

Contemporary modernists are usually conservative but nevertheless tend to adopt a more liberal outlook in the search for pluralistic, cosmopolitan and democratic values within the religious tradition itself. They focus, for example, on higher purposes of revelation and concepts such as *shūrā* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus) to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with modern principles of democratic governance. In terms of education, modernists seek to integrate the "modern" and the "Islamic" by including some Islamic subjects within a generally modern curriculum. An example of this is the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh (now called Aligarh Muslim University), founded in Aligarh in 1875 by reformist thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Nair, 2009). Many post-colonial Muslim states were guided by this Islamic approach. It is important to keep in mind that Muslim modernism (or modernist/reformist Salafism) has shaped the wider Islamic landscape that exists today, across all orientations, and significantly influenced the way Muslims interpret Islam (in the spirit of modern moral and social sensibilities). As a result, modernist Salafism has provided a framework for all other Islamic orientations described in this chapter.

2.1.3 Neo-salafi movements and the "Islamisation of knowledge"

Neo-Salafism (Duderija 2011) is sometimes referred to as "literal Salafism" (Ramadan 2004) or "Wahhabism" – to highlight the intellectual roots of this orientation in 18th century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, see Hashem (2006). The main difference between original Salafi reformists (such as Abduh) and neo-Salafism is that neo-Salafism aspires to a literalism that in practice results in a narrow emphasis on the *ḥadīth* corpus. Modernist Salafis showed more openness towards independent reasoning (Brown, 2014).

Both traditionalist Salafis (in this section) and radical Salafism (in the next section) are sometimes classed as "Islamists" (Sadaalah 2004). Yet, within Salafism there is much variety, and today there are many groups with different

political views that call themselves “Salafi”. Salafism is far from a united front; Bin Ali (2012) identifies at least eight sub-cultures within Salafism, which can be broadened back to three trends: purists (who prioritise purification through education and propagation), political Salafis (who incorporate political activism within existent political structures) and militant Salafis (who emphasise revolution).

Purists tend to endorse “obedience to the leaders” and hold negative views of “revolutionary methods” of engagement, from pacifist demonstrations to militancy, which some proponents believe originate from Western political culture and not Islam. A key point of contention between these groups is exactly which religious conditions must be met in any specific sociopolitical context to justify political engagement, protests or uprisings.

Salafi religious speakers and intellectuals, a sort of intermediary between the scholars and the laypeople, are actively involved in the diffusion of Salafi ideologies, often through new media technologies (Sadaalah, 2004; Salvatore, 1998). According to Sadaalah, Salafis call for a type of “hybrid” modern and Islamic education, i.e. the Islamisation of knowledge.

On Islamising education

The idea of Islamising secular education began in the late 1960s and was formalised through the creation of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in 1971, with the First International Conference of Muslim Education, held in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in 1977, and subsequently with the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IITT) and the Islamic International Universities from 1981 (Dangor, 2005). Though these Islamic International Universities went through various phases (Reetz 2010), the overarching goal has generally been to acquire proficiency in the secular sciences and subsequently infuse them with an Islamic perspective. Such a goal resulted in a “tangible project at the IITT … to develop university level textbooks for every discipline from an Islamic perspective” (Memon, 2009).

According to the advocates of “Islamisation”, education should be “moral” because it functions as a selection process through which individuals with good moral qualities can advance and take higher (civic and political) positions, thus ultimately contributing to the creation of an orderly and uncorrupted society (al-Attas, 1979). Proponents of Islamisation portray the disastrous consequences of secular education and the immorality deriving from loss of religious guidance (Ashraf, 1985; Bilgrami & Ashraf, 1985; Muslehuddin, 1982). Islamisation implies that wherever secular subjects are perceived to contradict Islamic doctrines, these should be made to adhere to Islamic textual evidence through various forms of reasoned refutations and, in extreme cases, censorship (Mamouri, 2014). This type of education has received criticism because it can potentially limit the breadth and scope of the curriculum and place constraints on scientific freedom whenever a particular subject area, empirical data or theory is perceived to contradict the tenets of Islam (Panjwani, 2004).

Islamisation has been a popular albeit elusive idea. A survey of Egyptian students’ attitude to public higher education conducted by Cook (2001) found that the majority of students were in favour of Islamisation while not having a clear idea of what Islamisation would actually entail in practice. Critics of “Islamisation” see it as essentially a modern form of education embellished with Islamic terminology – and dangerously so, because using the term “Islamic” (and its opposite “un-Islamic”) can obscure the pluralism found in Muslim intellectual history and civic life (Panjwani, 2004).

2.1.4 Militant ideologies and non-formal learning

Militant Salafism relies mostly on non-formal types of education (Lia, 2008; Sadaalah, 2004). This ideology stems from thinkers such as Abul A’la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, who called for the creation of an “Islamic State” (albeit in different ways). In their eyes, this meant “restoring” the caliphate, although some critics point out that the prevalent use of the term “state” and its perceived

features – for example its vast administrative reach and power to coerce – seems to have thoroughly modern connotations (Ahmad, 2009; Hallaq, 2014). The offshoots of these ideologies take a variety of different forms (Wiktorowicz, 2005) and their proponents use the internet and new media technologies extensively for recruitment and propagation. The education promoted by these groups is sometimes described as "anti-intellectualist"; it is characterised by literalist interpretations of traditions and the imitation of selected aspects of early Muslim history (Al-Azm, 2010).

Lia (2008) studied an online militant training manual titled "The Management of Savagery" by Abu Bakr Naji and noted that education was described as action-oriented. For Lia, Naji's action-oriented education "is naturally dismissive of the traditional methods of merely reciting the Holy Qurʾan, teaching the laws and extracting the moral lessons [from it]" (p. 530). The practical education is divided into four parts: education by exhortation, education by habit, education by pious deeds, education by example or model, and education by momentous (terrible) events. As I will show in the next few chapters, the neo-traditionalist instructors in my fieldwork focused mainly on the social change that could result through education, i.e. education by habit and by pious deeds.

2.1.5 Scholastic traditionalism, neo-traditionalism and madrasa reform

Rather than aspiring to return to the glorious origins of early Islam in the way that Salafis do, proponents of traditionalism hold that Muslims should be guided by – and operate within – the traditional schools of jurisprudence that existed in the pre-modern Islamic world. Instead of seeking to do away with the cultural heritage of medieval Islam, traditionalists call for continuity with the past by arguing that the institutions that were consolidated by Muslim scholars in the middle ages provide all the tools that Muslims need to operate successfully in

the modern world (Brown, 2014). For them, the spiritual, theological, and legal positions of these institutions represent “authentic” Sunni Islam.

This position produces a highly specialised type of education whose main purpose tends to be that of educating scholars (Sadaalah, 2004). Reetz (2010) divides scholasticism in two broad categories: traditional and orthodox. The first consists of *Sufi* groups attached to particular *tariqas* (orders, such as Naqshbandi) or local *pirs* (spiritual leaders, for example, in some Berelwis communities originating in South Asia). These *Sufi* groups are characterised by devotional practices and beliefs.

The second category consists of orthodox establishments that introduced a “literalist curriculum” in an attempt to return to “authentic” traditions (Reetz, 2010). An example of this second movement is *Darul Uloom Deoband*, a school founded in Deoband, India, from which the Deobandi movement originated and later spread throughout South Asia and around the world (Bowen, 2012; Hashmi, 1989). Significantly, the Deobandi movement is now varied and is also considered “traditional” compared to the Salafi movement, though they both share some important characteristics, such as literalism.

Sadek Hamid describes a third form of traditionalism (or as I refer to it here, neo-traditionalism), which he calls the “Anglo-American Traditional Islam Network”. Neo-traditionalism consists of a younger generation of Muslims who see *Sufi* orders as the “folkloric legacy of their parents’ generation” (2016, p. 75). The network is transnational in nature and inspired and led by personalities such as Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir in the USA, Abdal-Hakim Murad in the UK, among others.

Scholars and intellectuals who represent this network do not advocate *Sufi* practices explicitly, or as a requirement. Neo-traditionalism presents a toned-down version of *Sufism* which conforms with contemporary sensibilities. For example, it does not “support either the immanentism of Ibn ʿArabi (1165-1240) or popular practices associated with esoteric, ecstatic Sufism” (Hamid, 2016, p. 83).

Neo-traditionalists are in search of an “authentic” Islam “cleaned” of cultural (or folk) elements that compromise original Islamic principles and intents. As a result, Islamic narratives and practices adopt Western characteristics by making frequent reference to British-American culture, politics and society. This process of “purification” draws neo-traditionalism nearer to mainstream Salafism as transnational and culturally western(ised) movements.

In terms of education, neo-traditionalists advocate “religious education work”, and they are likely to be more civically engaged than their older generation of Sufi and orthodox traditionalists (Hamid 2016). As a result, neo-traditionalists do not limit themselves to providing highly specialised training to scholars in specific settings, like traditional scholasticism, but are instead actively engaged in expanding the provision of Islamic education in Muslim communities including through innovative information and communication technologies. The online Islamic institutes that feature in this research are two examples of this phenomenon.

Neo-traditionalists advocate adherence “to one of the four schools of thought”. Some institutes might focus primarily on one school of Islamic jurisprudence (e.g. Meem Institute[1]) while many educational establishments tend to provide educational “pathways” for two or more jurisprudential positions under one roof, as a “one-stop shop” where Muslims can learn in accordance with the school of thought of their choosing. This happens less in Salafi settings, which tend to promote a reasoned synthesis of all schools of thought.

The “one-stop shop” approach practised by neo-traditionalists aims to develop a culture of unity in (jurisprudential) diversity. Such a position is reinforced by “a pact of non-aggression” among Traditional Islam personalities, agreeing to revive the tradition of tolerance for diversity” (Hamid, 2016, p. 81). Neo-

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[1] http://meeminstitute.com (accessed 18 April 2022)

traditionalist networks promote “transmission-based teaching”. For example, some institutes offer *ḥadīth* recitals (often with an English explanation) from scholars who claim an uninterrupted chain of transmission to the original literary works they are teaching. Students who attend these classes are given an *ijaza* – an authorization to teach the particular narrations they hear narrated and explained by these scholars.

Scholasticism is sometimes subject to criticism because, critics claim, in the process of advocating the blind and rigid following of one school of law, they fail to maintain relevance in the modern world. But neo-traditionalists are seeking to address this criticism, and the Traditional Islam Network represents a new generation of Muslims who use new technologies to promote a traditional approach to Islam while seeking to mitigate those elements of scholasticism that are found to be incompatible with modernity.

2.1.6 Overlaps and connections between orientations

While there are clearly some differences between, for example, Salafi and neo-traditionalist orientations, there is a great deal of exchange within and between groups. An example of this interaction is a debate that was posted on YouTube with the title “*Sunni vs Wahabi | UNEDITED DEBATE | Is seeking help from the Prophet Shirk?”* between traditionalist scholar Shaykh Asrar Rashid and a Salafi scholar Ustadh Abdul Rahman Hassan. The two scholars were supported by their respective “teams” of students (AlMuhammadiyya, 2016). The debate was mediated by a convenor, deemed “neutral” by both parties, who read the strict conditions and procedures that would regulate the debate. The unedited video of this debate was published on YouTube in its entirety, totalling nearly five hours, for the public to view. The debate shows intra- and inter-group dynamics, especially the level of hostility but also of exchange, and how social media platforms are used to provide access to these debates. These debates seem to offer an opportunity of theological “edutainment” for Muslims, because

they may learn from these debates while being entertained by the performance of one or other team and by people's commentary on social media after the debate has taken place. It is a specific type of religious reality TV show about the internal politics of British Muslim communities, where the leaders/scholars act as protagonists who have their own communities of devotees, as well as those who do not support them. How much the viewers are genuinely committed to one specific team/scholar, to what extent and why, or how much viewers tend to "shop around", perhaps viewing the YouTube channels and lecture series of scholars belonging to "opposite" camps, are certainly worthwhile questions to explore in future research.

Despite their differences, the two groups have things in common – a reverence for Islamic traditions, a commitment to faith, scholars with charismatic personalities, a social media presence, a sense of belonging to a shared British Muslim community, an emphasis on legal technicalities and terminologies (often at the expense of substance), and elements of what Sahin calls a "foreclosed" religiosity (2013). An effect of these public debates is the formalisation of the process of navigating different Islamic orientations in search of an approach to understanding and practising faith. Moving across different Islamic orientations means that ideas are exchanged as people explore different networks, build relationships, share social media platforms to debate or put aside their differences to cooperate on common causes (Hamid, 2016).

2.2 Internet religion and online religious education

2.2.1 Digital religion

The phenomenon of religion online, defined as "the form traditional and non-traditional religious practices and discourses take when they appear on the Internet", goes back to the very beginning of the internet in the early 1980s (Campbell, 2005; 2006, p. 3). Interest in writing about this phenomenon started

to develop in the mid 1990s and then took the shape of a field of study in its own right around the turn of the century. Because of its nature, the study of online religion is interdisciplinary, spanning various fields including sociology, theology, communication, education and philosophy. Broadly speaking, computer or digital technologies have been understood either in continuity with previous media innovations (such as the printing press), or as marking a radical break with the past (Greifenhagen, 2015). Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that the internet is at least partly responsible for the deep transformation of society into one that is based on networks and information. Contemporary society is characterised by instant communication, greater access to information and wider participation in knowledge creation, all of which has threatened or transformed traditional hierarchies whilst developing new power dynamics in terms of politics and wealth concentration, most notably in the tech and information industry.

The first writings on cyber religion were mainly speculative, expressing either optimism over the transformative potential of these new technologies or scepticism about its potential harms. This has been categorised as the first wave of research into online religion (Frost & Youngblood, 2014; Greifenhagen, 2015). The second wave was characterised by various attempts to develop a typology of online religion, proposing definitions, classifying websites, and exploring how religious life might work online. In the following wave, scholars increasingly engaged in theoretical research in order to understand the impact that online religion has on religious practice offline. Whether these new media technologies change the way people behave offline has been a central question within the study of computer mediated communication more broadly (Pihlaja, 2018). Campbell referred to the internet as a “cultured technology” that “shapes and is shaped by the culture in which it is being utilised” (2005, p. 313). Similarly, drawing parallels between the internet and religion, Brasher (2001) framed online religion as “a form of new religious practice” that has the potential to transform the religious landscape (p. 22).

The early work of classifying different types of religious manifestations in cyberspace led Helland (2005) to make the theoretical distinction between "online religion" and "religion online". "Religion online" refers to those religious websites that provide only information (and therefore lack a participatory component). In the early 2000s, these websites were most associated with official and formal religious groups. "Online religion", on the other hand, refers to those religious websites where people can contribute their views, interact with other users and participate in activities freely. The "online religion" and "religion online" distinction has been used, for example, as a theoretical framework for a content analysis of nearly three hundred websites associated with a popular Jewish organisation in the United States. This study found that larger congregations were more likely to have interactive content, which suggests interactivity may be linked to availability of resources (Frost & Youngblood, 2014). I will return to the issue of interactivity when I discuss the two case studies, the Islamic e-learning Institutes A and B, in chapters 3 and 4. This distinction is not fixed, as some traditional religious organisations (that perhaps were initially reluctant to do so) have incorporated some participatory elements into their online activities, while new religious groups, which were rooted initially in participation, have integrated some information into their websites. Thus, the distinction between "online religion" and "religion online" may be best understood along a spectrum. In section 2.3, I show that the ease of creating Islamic educational institutes online by Muslim activists/scholars from diverse educational backgrounds blurs the distinction between "official" and "grassroots" content creation. Moreover, since virtually anyone can create a new "Islamic educational institute online" (by creating a website that provides structured information with an interactive element) the line is also blurred between "participation" and "information".

Campbell (2006) has identified four main types of religious activities online: information-seeking, ritual or worship, recruitment and missionary work, and community participation. Several edited volumes and special issues have been

published over the past two decades exploring these digital phenomena across different faiths, including those focusing on traditional and new religions exploring issues such as community, identity, spirituality, authority and worship (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005). Some examples from different faiths include research on feminism, activism and “ultramodern” interpretations of Buddhism among Buddhist women (Tomalin, Starkey, & Halafoff, 2015), principles of self-regulation among Hindu monks who teach online (Ramanujan, 2018), and ritual in neo-pagan computer bulletin boards (Fernback, 2002).

The study of Islam and Muslims online is also alive and well, with several books and articles written about different types of media (forums, podcasts, social media pages, YouTube videos, etc.) and their respective communities online. There is also a journal, *CyberOrient – Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East and Islamic World*, dedicated entirely to this topic. Many of these studies focus especially on how the internet can function as a repository of Islamic resources and as a space for the expression of faith, socialisation, political debate and mobilisation (Abdel-Fadil, 2011; Atwan, 2015; Bunt, 2003; Echchaibi, 2011; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009; Guerrero Enterría, 2011; Hoffmann & Larsson, 2014; Lawrence, 2002; Mandaville, 1999; Mernissi, 2004; Piela, 2013; Sati, 2009). A recent edited volume *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Digital Age* (Rozehnal, 2022) provides a good overview of the key themes that have interested and continue to interest scholars of digital Islam and online Muslim spaces. One of the most prominent themes explored in this literature is the continued relevance of (and/or break from) traditional Islamic authority and the rise of new intellectuals, celebrity *shaykhs* and Muslim influencers in digital spaces. Another common theme is the issue of authenticity, greater accessibility to a diversity of Islamic expressions online and associated effects in Muslim communities. A recurrent interest within the literature is how new media helps to amplify the voices of marginalised communities, for example, migrants, women and minorities within

minorities such as syncretic non-orthodox Muslim communities or Muslims from specific ethnic backgrounds who use the internet to reclaim and shape their identities online. Finally, and perhaps more prominent in the study of Islam compared to other faith traditions, the literature demonstrates a keen interest in understanding how Muslims use online platforms to combat prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims as well as promoting intra and inter-religious tolerance.

In all this literature, it is less common to see digital Islam being conceptualised as an educational space, that is, a space where formal or informal Islamic education might take place. Engagement with Islam online has changed rapidly over the past decade. While forums, blogs, websites and podcasts naturally include an element of informal learning, the growth of e-learning tools that allow almost anyone to develop (structured and interactive) content represents a shift that follows a known historical trajectory of e-learning development (Harasim, 2006). How Muslims use these tools to develop grassroots educational programmes online therefore deserves greater attention within the field of Islam and media studies.

2.2.3 Distance education

Simonson, Smalidino, and Zvacek (2015) provide a definition of distance education that includes four key elements. First, the student and teacher should be geographically or physically distant from one another. Second, distance education should be "institutionally based", that is, there should be an organisation that exerts some influence over the learning process. The institution may be a "traditional college", or increasingly "non-traditional institutions", such as businesses, companies and corporations (p. 32). This second point raises the question of whether the internet is challenging traditional authorities and formal educational structures. As a result, there is a call for some form of accreditation to control "quality", improve "credibility" and

tackle the problem of online "diploma" mills. Noting this trend, Stover (2002) argues that unaccredited "religiously oriented, internet-based colleges" proliferate "due to the ease of setting up a virtual campus in comparison to a traditional physical campus" (p. 5). This is particularly interesting in relation to the case studies in this thesis because the two Islamic online institutes are non-traditional in the sense that they are not associated with a college or university and do not offer formal qualifications; however, they claim some continuity with traditional Islamic education in terms of the contents of the curriculum and the informal qualifications provided (this is particularly the case of institute B, see Chapter Four). Third, some form of media should connect the parties involved in the learning activities. Fourth, there should be two-way communication and some form of "individualised instruction". This fourth point most likely varies significantly across providers. As I will show later, in the Islamic e-learning institutes presented in this study, the level of individualised instruction varied considerably, with some modules within the same institutes offering some opportunities for participation while others provided none.

New media technologies, however, have revolutionised the way people think and do learning and have brought about new ways of understanding how knowledge should be produced. One well-known example is *Wikipedia*, which is a project rooted in the idea that people collaborate remotely on encyclopaedic entries via a platform that has no single author (Davidson, 2011). Open-source software allows people not only to share knowledge more democratically but also to co-create knowledge in more sophisticated ways (Peddycord III, Pitts, & Wisdom, 2013). Another example is the co-production of a scientific journal article written collaboratively on *Google docs* by over eighty academics as well as non-academics after a call for contributions was shared on Twitter (Sjoerds, 2018). An argument in favour of e-learning is that it has the potential to be less hierarchical and more student-centred. Digital tools provide opportunities to "create, remix and share" information as opposed to traditional transmission-

based learning from the top (educators) to the bottom (the students) (Hamdan, 2014; Jusoh & Jusoff, 2009; Peddycord III et al., 2013).

The internet has also changed the way people access education, with MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) being a prime example of free and widely accessible education from traditional universities. Online universities in developing countries have also been established in order to widen access to education, especially among the disadvantaged (Dirani & Yoon, 2009). One example of a large open university is Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan (www.aiou.edu.pk). One of the biggest concerns about the professed democratising and transformative potential of e-learning technologies is achieving a truly fair distribution of quality education. So far, evidence shows that e-learning benefits most privileged students who live in areas with fast internet connections, own the necessary equipment and already have qualifications and therefore use MOOCs to pursue additional professional development opportunities rather than foundational education (Laurillard, 2016). E-learning methods may have the potential to be inclusive, but cannot be truly so if some have the opportunities to pursue additional studies successfully, while disadvantaged students do not have the means to complete the foundational stages of education in the first place (Sims, Vidgen, & Powell, 2008).

MOOCs and Islamic e-learning share similar challenges in terms of assessment, e.g. how to assess existing and acquired competences and skills when students are learning remotely and completely independently with little or no interaction with instructors and colleagues. Many courses – especially those that provide free education – do not usually set any prerequisites for entry, nor do they assess the skill level of prospective students, and they usually offer minimal formative self-evaluation in the form of peer assessments or quizzes. Competences and skills are therefore two “pervasive” latent variables that are particularly difficult to assess in these online contexts.

2.2.3 Online religious education

According to Quinn, Foote, and Williams (2012), online theological education has grown exponentially since the early 2000s. A survey of nearly one hundred Christian institutions at the time showed that these courses have largely been financially worthwhile. Rogers and Howell (2009) consulted several religious leaders and scholars from different religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Baha'i faith, and found that these religious professionals had predominantly optimistic views of the educational potential of these new technologies (p. 1746). However, in political contexts where religion has been increasingly marginalised in support of secularism, it has sometimes been difficult for religious bodies "to gather the prestige and resources needed to create and support innovative educational models, such as computer-based distance education" (Rogers & Howell, 2009, p. 1745). Having enough resources to assure quality and innovation, both in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, may be a challenge shared amongst minority religions that, in secular contexts, lack broader institutional support, economic power and/or status in society, which is likely the case for the institutes under investigation in this study.

Many early papers on online religious education talked about the advantages and limitations of using these new technologies for the provision of online and hybrid ministry programmes in theological seminaries. For example, Marangos (2003) provided an enthusiastic account of the unique qualities of online education both in terms of pedagogy and social impact. The internet, Marangos claimed, had the potential to egalitarise education, providing remote access to experts to a greater number of people who could not dedicate themselves entirely to their studies. Pedagogically, to be effective, online theological education could not be simply a translation of traditional learning into a digital form (Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, & Polaski, 2011). Online education required thinking about new ways of developing student-centred courses that

encourage imagination rather than passive top-down learning, where the learning is constructed with or by the students. This comes from an acknowledgement that the nature of digital media often requires students to formulate their thoughts in writing and work collaboratively, more than they would in a physical environment (Marangos 2003). Others, like Sajjadi (2008) argued that the internet challenges traditional religious education, with its ultimate truths and established hierarchies, and the "hegemony of the teacher", because it provides the learner with a freedom of movement that is absent in traditional religious education. This paradigm shift towards multi-linearity is exemplified by the hypertext, a type of text that has "no beginning nor end", where the reader is always co-author. This type of reading, the author argues, "undermines the authority and stability of religious texts" (p. 188). This is possibly the case as the vastness of the internet allows users to be exposed and explore a larger number of opinions and ideas than they would do in physical spaces, thus challenging the status quo of the traditional religious authority.

Nearly twenty years since these early writings, digital practices (and the resultant forms of online education) have moved towards images, video, and audio (think of podcasts, YouTube, Instagram and Zoom), and away from the written word. The core learning material in many, if not most, e-learning courses, for example, is essentially a structured collection of video lectures (either live or recorded) – an activity that requires little writing. While there are many instances of innovation and co-creation of knowledge (e.g. wikis and open sources software), the development and pervasiveness of videos and audio material online suggests a resurgence of orality and/or the continued relevance of traditional, passive, top-down, learning. This is certainly the case for the Islamic e-learning courses I attended for the present study, which rely predominantly on audio and video recording and very little on reading and writing (as I show in Chapter 4).

An entry titled *Distance Education from Religions of the World* from the Encyclopaedia of Distance Education, Rogers and Howell (2004) categorised the use of the internet by religion for learning purposes into three types. The first was training provision for religious professionals, the second was the provision of religious degree programmes sponsored by faith groups, and the third was adult non-formal education for laypeople. My two case studies fall within this latter category. Frye (2012) focused specifically on this category, further differentiating different forms of online religious provision for the laity. He identified websites of existing religious organisations, such as churches and temples (which are used to publicise resources and information on in-person activities), social networking websites, YouTube, blogs, podcasts, webinars and forums. Finally, the author also distinguished between websites offered by higher education institutions affiliated with religious groups, and larger websites that aggregate information from multiple religious groups all in one place. An example of the latter is IslamiCity, which is a large conglomerate of information from several Islamic organisations.

One of the weaknesses of Frye's analysis is that he focuses primarily on existing religious groups as the main actors in this vast internet arena ('religion online"), while increased accessibility to online content creation in the Web 2.0 era means that individuals or unofficial groups can easily set up their own venture online without support from established institutions ("online religion"). As a result, understanding how organisations come into being online is as important as understanding the online presence of traditional brick and mortar organisations.

The majority of the literature on religious online education focuses on efficacy of online education provision and the factors that may result in positive religiosity outcomes, especially in terms of community spirit and spiritual formation of students, in online contexts compared to in-person settings (Fryar, Wilcox, Hilton, & Rich, 2018; Hilton, Plummer, Fryar, & Gardner, 2016; Hilton & Vogeler, 2021; Nichols, 2015). The "spiritual formation" of students online has

been a concern for Christian educators (Lowe & Lowe, 2010; White, 2006). The large body of literature on Christian online education explores principally whether "community" and social interaction online can offer the same (or similar) spiritual and educational benefits as face-to-face interpersonal connections between students and teachers in physical settings.

Fryar et al. (2018) interviewed students who attended a foundational course on the Book of Mormon at a private faith-based higher education institution, (Brigham Young University) and found that the success of online education relied primarily on self-direction. Motivated students focused on developing their spirituality independently, including from the instructors who they saw more as personal "guides rather than as the central figure in the learning process." (Fryar 2018: 65). Overall, the online religious course was perceived primarily as a personal experience. Other studies conducted at the same university suggested that there is generally no significant difference in terms of self-reported outcomes between online and in-person courses (Hilton et al 2016; Fryar et al 2018), although a study suggested better outcomes on face-to-face education (Hilton and Vogeler 2021).

For this study, the survey questions are a window for understanding the pedagogical approach used by the instructors. The survey asked if, because of the class, students thought they were "doing better at relating the scriptures to their life" or found it "easier to be more Christlike" (Hilton & Vogeler, 2021). These studies, however, did not explain (or perhaps took for granted) what exactly it means, for example, to "be Christlike" or relate scripture to everyday life. I have noticed a similar approach in studies that look at the efficacy of Islamic online schooling (Az Zafi et al 2021; Syafii and Retnawati 2022). These articles are concerned with ensuring "good and correct learning processes" to instil religious values. Yet, very much like their counterparts in Christian education, they do not provide any real analysis of the *meanings* that are conveyed through teaching. Az Zafi, et al (2021), for example, suggest religious values are founded in the "belief in God that exists in everyone" and associate

these values with “good behaviour”, “obedience” and “discipline”. The literature on online religious education that I consulted often assumes what religious or spiritual values are conveyed in the classroom and that they are fixed entities known within a religious community. In the present study, I purposely explore the hermeneutic processes taking place within an online learning community without assuming to know this orthopraxy/orthodoxy. As I result, I do not assume to know how efficacy can be measured. Instead of asking, for example, whether students felt more “Christ-like” after attending the online classes, I am interested in learning what the lecturer would say about being “Christ-like” and explore the political implications of the definition of “Christ-likeness”. For example, when As Zafi et al (2021) equate religious values with “obedience”, they are clearly, although perhaps unintentionally, making a statement about the attributes that a good citizen, in this case a model child, should have in their community. This study challenges these approaches that take for granted religious values and proposes a more explorative and reflective approach to the study of religion that could be relevant or applied to Islam, but also other religions. An example of this approach is outlined by Herman (2019), who provides a useful analysis of the application of reflective practice in online Middle Eastern Humanities courses at two higher education institutions. This practice included the students’ reflections on the potential application of their learning about the Middle East in their future careers, which gave the students opportunities to identify values emerging from their studies.

To this day, I have not come across studies that look at Islamic e-learning from the perspective of meaning-making or as a form of grassroots political theorising in the classroom. The literature on online religious education focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on spiritual growth, the teacher or student experience, emotional growth, community development, and pedagogical challenges and opportunities specific to the medium. In some cases, studies focus on how a religious motif or idea of a particular faith community develop in an online religious educational setting. This is the case, for example, in a study

in which Hindu monks who teach online were interviewed to understand the application of principles of self-regulation on a Hindu online learning platform (Ramanujan, 2018). Another study looked at students' experiences and understanding of community at a Catholic institute as they sought to apply principles from the Dominican tradition of "wisdom community" in their practice outside the classroom (Porterfield, 2013).

In Muslim-majority contexts, there has been research on experiences, perceptions and measures of effectiveness in existing education institutions (Abulatifeh, 2011; Al-Soraiey-Alqahtani, 2010; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2010; Naveed, Muhammad, Sanober, Qureshi, & Shah, 2017; Omer et al., 2015; Saeed & Saeed, 2013) and the development of Islamic school provision online in Indonesia (Ilaihi, 2019). Much of this research originates in Indonesia and focuses on the efficacy of different online platforms and apps, such as WhatsApp (Ashif Az, Maulida, Siswanto, & Irwan, 2021).

Most recently, these papers have focused on online RE or Islamic education of school-aged pupils during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one study looked at student satisfaction (Suwarno, Saputra, Wathoni, Tamrin, & Aini, 2021) and another at the preference for different applications, such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google and YouTube (Yumnah, 2021). Iswanto, Santoso, Muzayanah, and Muawanah (2021) carried out a survey of over 17,000 Islamic and public school schoolteachers across Indonesia to learn about their experiences of teaching Islam to pupils online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey highlighted lack of training, predominance of WhatsApp, poor connectivity and absence of significant change in use of applications before and during the pandemic.

This literature on online religious education from Indonesia (both pre- and post-pandemic) is an interesting phenomenon. Although published in indexed academic journals, it takes the form of short open-source articles that are primarily descriptive and of low quality in terms of academic writing style, editing and presentation. Compared to the literature on online Christian education,

which has engaged in extensive theoretical debates on the benefits and challenges of online education over the past twenty years, this body of literature is more recent and overall lacks theoretical depth.

2.3 Impact of new media and the fragmentation of traditional authority

Distinguishing a traditional scholar and a modern Muslim intellectual is no longer as straightforward as it might have been in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This is mainly due to the expansion of mass education. As part of the same trend, when religious education lost importance in favour of modern secular education, the social relevance of classically trained *ʿulamaʾ* (scholars) also declined (Esposito & Voll, 2001; Zeghal, 2014). "Religious knowledge" Zeghal argues, has not been "marginalised", rather it has been "deeply transformed by its combination with secular knowledge" (Zeghal, 2014, p. 137). For some scholars, like Abou el Fadl (b. 1963), these changes have meant the collapse of traditional Islamic learning and, as a result, the loss of nuance and deep understanding of the "interpretative communities" of premodern Islam. Abou El Fadl paints a deeply troubling picture of the impact that this loss has had on contemporary Islamic discourse and practice:

> Consequently, persons, mostly engineers, medical doctors, and physical scientists, who were primarily self-taught and whose knowledge of Islamic text and history was quite superficial were able to position themselves as authorities on Islamic law and theology. Islamic law and theology became the extracurricular hobby of pamphlet readers and writers. As such, Islamic intellectual culture witnessed an unprecedented level of deterioration, as self-proclaimed and self-taught experts reduced the Islamic heritage to the least common denominator, which often amounted to engaging in crass generalizations about the nature of Islam, and the nature of the non-Muslim "other." (Abou El Fadl, 2003, p. 47)

As I will argue throughout the thesis, it is possible that many of the Islamic education centres that are being set up today (online or offline) are both

perpetuating and reacting against the perceived deterioration of Islamic intellectual culture.

Most Muslims today receive modern-secular education (or elements of it) in their formative years. For many in the West, Islamic education is something that is pursued with different degrees of intensity and in different ways (autodidactically and/or alongside formally trained teachers) as an extracurricular activity or as a hobby, often for many years. In fact, the online institutes in this thesis offer part-time Islamic studies programmes (face-to-face and online) to fit the lifestyle of Muslims who work or study full-time elsewhere. In some countries like Egypt, the inclusion of traditional ʿulamaʾ in mainstream modern education system in the 1960s blurred the boundaries that existed between modern and conservative elements of society (Muslim secular modernists/Islamists and Islamic scholars respectively). In practice, this led to the emergence of an entirely new class of modern Muslim intellectuals "who would be at home in both religious learning and the modern secular sciences" (Zaman, 2010, p. 145).

Many of these modern Muslim intellectuals in the 20th century were inspired by the traditional knowledge transmitted by the *ʿulamaʾ* without being necessarily committed to them and sought not only to make Islam relevant to modern times but to be a catalyst for change, in this sense, they were politically engaged activist-intellectuals (Esposito & Voll, 2001). Esposito and Voll explain:

> Among the modern educated classes, a new style of Muslim intellectual emerged, who was committed to effective transformation of society but within the framework of ideologies and programs that could be identified as authentically Islamic. (2001, p. 20).

In order to remain relevant, over the decades classically trained scholars have increasingly engaged in grassroots activism and cultivated relationships with modern Muslim intellectuals (Zaman, 2010). Another element that contributed to the decline of traditional Islamic scholarship – especially its crucial role in education – and the rise of new intellectuals from the last few decades of the

19th century onwards was the diffusion of innovative information and communication technologies.

The introduction of the printing press and books in the Muslim world revolutionised social, cultural and political life (Atiyeh, 1995). In the contemporary Muslim world, the internet has had a similar effect to the impact that print materials had a century earlier. The internet has changed the way people learn, socialise, mobilise, debate and engage with Islam. Social media, for example, played a central role in the protests and revolts of the past years (the Arab Spring is a prominent example) (Herrera, 2014).

The cultural changes that result from increased access to communication and information technologies create a social capital that is not immediately visible. Interactions may develop in private forums online without ever developing into physical relationships. Nevertheless these interactions can impact people's lives in many ways. For example, conversations that happen online can influence people's thinking and the decisions they make offline.

This internet "social capital" can also be viewed as a form of informal education. In the online spaces that these online knowledge communities create, sharing of information and exchange of ideas is constantly happening outside traditional institutions (Davidson, Goldberg, & Jones, 2010). At times, these spaces come together around social issues and feed further distrust in mainstream/formal institutions. Online informal places of knowledge sharing and movement building can in some circumstances also give sections of the population the confidence to mobilise.

Beginning with pamphlets and posters, then audio-cassettes and TV programmes, and finally with the internet, information and communication technologies, combined with higher rates of literacy and mass education, have played a key role in changing how Islam is interpreted and by whom (Hefner & Zaman, 2007). Additionally, these novel ways of understanding, communicating and living Islam cannot be understood without considering the wider context defined by Western colonialism, urbanisation and modernisation. These are all

processes that have affected people's lifestyle, sensibilities, ambitions, and visual and material culture in concrete ways.

From the early days of the internet – with the "read-only" web 1.0 – the internet has featured Islamic resources such as the Qurʾan, Qurʾanic exegeses, *ḥadīth* collections, databases of Islamic rulings and forums (Lawrence, 2002). Anderson (2003) observed that in the earliest phase, only science and technology students who had access to the internet and the necessary skills uploaded Islamic texts and created message boards to debate Islam as a hobby. These students had primarily technical expertise and little Islamic knowledge. Later, as the internet spread more widely, Islamic activists and groups added context to these Islamic resources in the form of commentaries and sociopolitical critique, which included official discourses by existing Islamic organisations, governments and traditional media.

Today, Islamic texts that were once accessible only to students in Islamic institutes of higher education are regularly read by people with little to no classical Islamic training. The prevalence of translations of the meanings of the Qurʾan and other canonical texts is also an indication that ordinary people are increasingly accessing these texts to make meaning and find solutions to their questions. This, Pink argues, contrasts with a large part of the premodern past when "neither the knowledge of the entire Qurʾanic text were very common, and even where it was taught, this was not necessarily done with a focus on meaning" (Pink, 2020, p. 15). Widening access to the meanings of texts is a process that started much earlier than the internet, in the 18th century, with reformist scholar Wali Allah (1703-1762), who was a "proponent of translating the Qurʾan into vernacular language in order to enable a larger number of Muslims to understand its message" (Pink 2020: 18).

This represents a radical shift from the ways Muslims used to understand the purpose of knowledge transmission in the premodern world. Mandaville argues that new media technologies have contributed to the fragmentation of traditional religious authority (ʿulamaʾ), which does not necessarily bring about the

democratisation of knowledge, but, more likely, the “intensification of a tendency towards decentralised authority that has always been present in Islam” (Mandaville, 2007, p. 102). Eickelman and Anderson were among the first to write that “the proliferation of actors able to assert a public role leads to a fragmentation of authority, and it increases the numbers of persons involved in creating and sustaining a religious-civil public sphere” (2003, p. 14).

As technologies become more sophisticated with the bourgeoning of web 2.0 (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2020), websites become digital platforms specifically designed for user-generated content and, as they were later embedded into mobile technologies through apps, the gap between online and offline activities has dramatically reduced (Pihlaja, 2018). This provided increasing opportunities for anyone to connect, communicate and interact with likeminded people around the world in written, visual and oral forms (Svensson, 2013; Vis, Van Zoonen, & Mihelj, 2011). The internet becomes not only a tool to access resources, but ultimately a social space where new connections, networks, and communities with various degrees of intensity are formed.

As a result, increasing numbers of Muslims connect around the identifier “Islam” to talk about its many facets (legal rulings and intellectual issues concerning gender, activism, fashion, food, festivals, charity, scholars, etc.). By interacting online, Muslims create interconnected groups that form networks (some overlapping more than others) that contribute to shared identities and transnational Muslim/Islamic narratives on local, national and international issues. At the same time, the opposite can also be the case as internet spaces can also become “silos” that foster the formation of marginal and extreme narratives. Note, for example, the growth of “incel” and far-right communities (Baele et al., 2020).

Earlier, I mentioned the rise of new Muslim intellectuals – digital influencers (although it is difficult to quantify how “influential” other than in terms of “mentions”, “clicks” or numbers of “followers”) who discuss Islam and contemporary issues online. These tech-savvy, digital storytellers are usually

more relatable to ordinary Muslims, especially young people, than perhaps traditional scholars, and, with their engaging content, can challenge notions of traditional authority whilst constructing a new more accessible image of what it means to be Muslim (Zaid, Fedtke, Shin, El Kadoussi, & Ibahrine, 2022). Examples of these new Islamic personalities are Egyptian "accountant-turned preacher" Amr Khaled, whose forum was analysed by El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009), American-Iranian popular video blogger Ali Ardekani (Echchaibi, 2011), Emirati couple Salama Mohamed and Khalid Al Ameri, Saudi influencer Ahmad Al-Shugairi, Behraini filmmaker Omar Farooq (Zaid et al., 2022), and many others.

There are many more prominent preachers who specialise in *daʿwa* (promulgation of the religion), *daʿwa* training, and debating about Islam in public forums, conferences, university campuses and on television. Examples of new activist-intellectuals who have a mixture of secular academic and traditional education are Abdurrahim Green (*Islamic Education and Research Academy* – iera.org) and Yusuf Chambers. Belonging to a slightly "younger" generation there are Andreas Tzortzis, Abdullah al-Andalusi, Mohammed Hijab, "Dawah Man" (Schneider, 2018) in the UK, and Daniel Haqiqatjou and Dr Tamara Gray in the USA. Many more of these individuals exist. These thinkers, public speakers, activists and/or influencers focus on criticising aspects of modern society, such as science, secularism, feminism and liberalism, often from a philosophical perspective. These individuals have established or teach at institutes that provide Islamic education online. Examples of Islamic e-learning institutes associated to the above individuals are *The Knowledge College* (knowledgecollegeonline.com), *Sapience Institute* (sapienceinstitute.org), *Al Balagh Academy* (albalaghacademy.org), Alasna Institute (www.alasna.org) and *Ribaat Academic Institute* for women (www.rabata.org).

The founders of these institutes and their lecturers are from a mixture of different backgrounds, some have formal qualifications from religious institutions (e.g. university, *dār al-ʿulūm* or other types of religious seminary) or

have received licenses to teach directly from traditional scholars. Many have also graduated from secular universities with undergraduate degrees or master's and PhDs in Islamic studies, while others have science and medical degrees. *Al Balagh Academy* is an interesting example because it features sixty such lecturers from around the world, suggesting that rather than bringing about the fragmentation or diversification of Islamic discourse/authority, the internet may be contributing to the formation of alliances between new media influencers and traditionally educated *ʿulamaʾ*. Based on affinity along religious, political or ideological lines, these alliances can develop into new informal educational conglomerates of Islamic authority. These new conglomerates sit alongside myriad institutes of learning based on smaller groups of scholars or even individual scholars and an even larger number of unorthodox Muslim communities of practice (cultural Muslims, progressives, feminists, LGBTQ+ etc.).

A question that has interested researchers is the quality of debate that can be achieved in these contexts (such as internet forums) where laypeople take on difficult and often specialist topics. This relates closely to the concept of *ijtihād*, which means the individual reasoning or discretion of the scholar who engages in the process of finding answers to legal matters, often using analogy as the primary or only method to formulate opinions on religious texts (Schacht & MacDonald, 2006). From the middle of the 9th century, debates ensued over the practice of *ijtihād*, which led to idea that only early Islamic scholars were in a position to extract legal prescriptions and principles directly from the sources. As rules had already been laid out in the previous century, later scholars would have to limit themselves to obtain answers from past scholars. In the premodern meaning of *ijtihād.* therefore, only religious scholars are qualified to interpret the texts or source solutions from previous scholars. With mass education, new media technologies and the resulting widening of Islamic discourse, the classical concept and practice of *ijtihād* has changed dramatically. With many Muslims online accessing and reading Islamic texts and engaging with its

meanings, it is increasingly almost assumed that this is a competence that all Muslims have (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009).

Islamic discourse no longer relies primarily on scholars but also crucially it takes place among lay Muslims through participation in the public sphere, such as forums, social media, etc. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) explain that lay Muslims talking freely about Islam online can also result in a "knowledge void" due to the visible absence of expertise in discussion forums, which can lead to an increase in the dogmatic views, generalisations and inaccurate information present in these spaces (p. 217). El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) found that online exchanges in Islamic forums were either characterised by superficial agreement or disagreement based on strong identity markers such as gender or nationality. They concluded that these online spaces could not be defined as a "public sphere" in the Habermasian sense, because they lacked the conditions that allow people to debate rationally on accurate, well-researched information with the aim to reach consensus.

An even broader consideration, highlighted by Mandaville (2007), and others such as Meijer (2009), is a specific approach to thinking about Islam adopted by many lay Muslims today. These authors argue that, because many Muslims take higher education courses in science, medicine, engineering and technology before moving onto Islamic studies, certain technical ways of thinking from these academic disciplines have already taken root. This means that many Muslims interpret texts by using "problem-solving methodologies that permit dilemmas and predicaments to be resolved by working through a present sequence of ordered steps with an unambiguous answer or solution" (Mandaville, 2007, p. 107).

Mandaville expresses these concerns in relation to Salafism in particular, but I argue they may be applicable to neo-traditionalism too. It represents a general expectation that the texts, which are believed to be representative of "Islam", must offer clear-cut answers regarding "do's and don'ts". The result is a tendency to reject methodological positions that emphasise the subjective

nature of knowledge, the layers of meanings, ambivalence of texts and historical contextualisation and allegory on specific issues. It is argued that the search for universal answers that characterises contemporary Islamic interpretation differs from premodern scholarship in significant ways. Regarding the interpretations of the meanings of the Qurʾan and correct religious practice, for example, Pink (2020) contends that much of premodern scholarly work legitimised difference of opinion by engaging in an exploration of "layers of meaning" and "transmission of authoritative past opinions". Rarely was this done with the intention of reaching "an unambiguous, coherent message" (p. 16).

Some Muslims argue that Islamic scholars are perceived to be "detached" from their communities as they dive deep into the intricacies and complexities of classical works. As a result, other Muslims, such as YouTube "influencers", have taken it upon themselves to find "Islamic solutions" to the larger issues that feel relevant to Muslims today. Some scholars have identified and reacted to this trend by going online too, or by forming collaborations with "new intellectuals". A conservative scholar in the UK in an interview for a British news outlet joked that some students he once visited in Turkey were excited to know if the scholar knew some British Muslim YouTubers personally. These Muslim YouTubers who talk about Islam in their videos had become role models to the young Turkish students. The punchline of the joke was that everybody knew about the Muslim YouTubers but nobody knew the name of "the *shaykh* of all of them", meaning himself (5Pillars, 2020). Despite his formal training in Islamic studies, this scholar understood his limited "social media" authority, i.e. popularity, and explained in this interview that his role was to provide expert advice to these young YouTube influencers, who have, by way of their popularity, gained some authority despite lacking qualifications. Haitham admitted that he could not reduce the popularity of these "YouTube influencers", so he decided to advise them and thus promote his Islamic views *through* them.

Another strategy to seek impact, in a bid to fill knowledge voids and add some expertise to Muslim discussion spaces, is to develop widely accessible teaching material. As a result, some Islamic scholars and “new intellectuals” are engaged in developing independent institutes dedicated to teaching Islam to adults, sometimes in the form of weekend retreats or evening classes, sometimes by offering programmes of learning entirely online. Increasingly, for example, Islamic e-learning programmes include instructors from different backgrounds, some with qualifications in Islamic Studies from Islamic universities, some from secular universities and other secularly educated individuals who have only informal Islamic education.

The aim of these institutes is perhaps to close the gap between the lack of regulation of Islamic discourse that happens online among laypeople and the exclusiveness that is necessarily present at certain levels of Islamic scholarship. These institutes encourage more structured traditional Islamic learning among lay publics, while at the same time making a statement about the need to reassert the ultimate authority of Islamic scholars on interpretative matters. As Starrett noted, education is a means to “redraw boundaries between social groups and disrupt the association between them and the ‘ideas about knowledge’ they seek to promote”(Starrett, 1998, p. 11). This can be achieved by naming categories of people (e.g. non-Muslims, activists, *daʿwa* carriers, students of knowledge, scholars), organising the teaching and classroom discussions in a specific way that reinforces these categories, or promoting or critiquing certain epistemological paradigms over others.

The latter approach in particular, Sahin (2019) argues, has led to a binary view of Islam and the secular West based mainly on “mutual prejudice and stereotyping of both educational cultures” (p. 14), which is predominant among some Muslim educators. Moreover, Sahin argues that Islamic institutes for Islamic education and training in the West overall provide a teacher- and text-centred educational approach that for the most part does not offer students opportunities to develop critical learning skills, self-reflection, open engagement

with Islamic traditions and professionalism (p. 212). “Often set up by charismatic personalities”, Sahin explains, “these institutions show more interest in reproducing the existing power structures, expanding their influence among the young by perpetuating certain interpretations of Islam” (p. 18).

In the same paper, Sahin argues that research on independent Islamic higher education institutions, often established as transnational organisations and increasingly operating also online, is scarce. Existing ethnographic research on the subject is too anecdotal to be taken seriously. I argue that ethnographic detail is as important as broader surveys of the Islamic educational landscape. In the field of Islamic e-learning, this is even more the case. Ethnographic detail should complement research on digital Islam, such as Bunt’s pioneering work on this topic from the early 2000s onwards. In addition to investigating how Muslims use innovative technologies to communicate about Islam in digital contexts and examining broad tendencies in terms of shifts in Islamic authority, it is essential to examine local interpretative practices in detail in order to understand how the relationship between contexts, people and texts plays out in local online spaces. The present thesis is an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of a portion of the curriculum for this reason; it aims to understand how group identity and boundaries between groups are drawn by examining the social and political relevance of the epistemological positions adopted in the classroom. This study can inform our understanding of the educational culture that is taking shape online and the epistemological and civic principles that underpin it.

The online Islamic education featured in this study is particularly important because it provides easy-to-access alternatives to the Islamic programmes offered by formal, well-established higher education institutions (secular and faith-based). Formal institutions are often hard to access without substantial commitment of time and money. These online institutes offer mid-tier educational options that fulfil demand for accessible and flexible Islamic education, with the potential of impacting a significant number of Muslims.

2.4 Citizenship and the reproduction of authorised discourse in education

So far, I have explored the role of the internet in changing the landscape of Islamic discourse and authority. I have also mentioned how mass education and new media technologies have enabled the promotion of Islam as a source of sociopolitical changes in response to Western colonial influence. In this section, I first introduce the role of education in the development of civic engagement and citizenship, and then I look at debates on the tensions and intersections between religion and citizenship.

2.4.1 Civic engagement in education

In response to what has been widely perceived as a decline in civic and political participation – a claim famously put forward by Putnam (1995), which has, however, not been left undisputed (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005) – education has been increasingly perceived as playing an important role in getting young people interested and involved in civic and political life.

A growing trend in universities is to integrate a civic function into higher education programmes by reviving liberal arts education through service-learning programmes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Barker, 2011; Butin, 2010). Scholars interested in service learning have been looking to find ways to encourage reflection on how “a society should be organized if it is to be truly good” (Reiff & Keene, 2012). At the same time (perhaps not coincidentally) higher education is also witnessing its own commercialisation, where for example the worth of degree programmes is measured in terms of how profitable and functional to the job market they are (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

Political engagement is important among many students around the world, not only in democratic states (where certain forms of engagement are actively promoted) but also in fragile democracies and in authoritarian states where civil society and political engagement are often suppressed (Tapia, 2012). Understanding how citizenship education (in schools) and civic engagement programmes (in higher education) are designed can help us understand what society expects from educational institutions and how it defines citizenship. Despite the shared conviction that education should prepare young people to participate in society, the practical meanings of citizenship vary enormously. Some definitions highlight the act of voting or influencing the political process in other ways (protest, lobbying etc.). Other definitions focus on other forms of engagement (e.g. community service) and yet others regard citizenship in terms of obedience, i.e. being law-abiding members of society.

Experiential learning, in the form of service-learning programmes in higher education institutions, is based on the assumption that political and civic participation strengthens democratic life (Butin & Seider, 2012; Tapia, 2012; Watson, Hollister, Stroud, & Babcock, 2011). Experiential learning is a transformative pedagogy that takes the form of structured civic engagement within an academic programme in order to enhance critical reflection on the relationship between theory and practice in the community and society (Astin et al., 2000; Butin & Seider, 2012; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

An important critique of civic engagement programmes is that they are designed to reproduce authoritative discourses and reinforce the legitimacy (rather than encourage the questioning) of existing power structures (Hedtke & Zimenkova, 2013). They represent "depolicised" forms of citizenship education that serve either to "fill the gap" in social service provision or to enhance social responsibility while tackling controversial issues. In authoritarian countries and unstable democracies, community service can be used to foster patriotic ideals, obedience and trust in the state's capabilities (ibid.).

Education has the political function of reproducing sociocultural meanings and the political and economic ideologies that are considered important by dominant groups in order to sustain the power dynamics that exist in society (Apple, 1979). That is, education institutions promote certain values – as if they were intuitive and common-sensical – and in turn help to transform these particular values into norms that people are less likely to question.

In many ways, schools, colleges, and universities define what "normal" is. It is increasingly agreed that the content of any curriculum is neither ahistorical nor apolitical, rather it is shaped by sociopolitical power dynamics that exist in society at any given time. In this sense, this research study seeks to understand the kind of values that are being reproduced in the online Islamic classroom, that is, what social and political functions this knowledge may have.

Very similar concerns are raised in the analysis of citizenship education in other contexts. For example, in Pakistan a debate exists between those who believe that "the goal of civic education … should be preparation for democratic life" and those who instead think civic education should "not foster democracy but … produce good, practising Muslims" (Dean, 2007, p. 10). The latter is usually associated with a prescriptive approach to teaching subjects related to civic and social studies, without the requirement to understand, reflect and debate upon relevant social issues.

Mokhtar and Tan offer a similar critique of "Islamic Social Studies", a subject that was introduced in Singaporean *madrasas* to promote the communitarian state ideology. In their study, they specifically criticise the syllabus, which in their opinion does not provide any space to "examine complex and controversial issues and debate on competing viewpoints" (Mokhtar & Tan, 2010, p. 163). Similar observations were made in the comparative analysis of citizenship and religious textbooks in various countries in the Middle East, where it was found that Islamic concepts were used to justify specific national images and instil patriotic values (Starrett & Doumato, 2007).

For the reasons mentioned above, Waghid and Smeyers (2014) argue for the need to implement a "democratic citizenship education" that can foster democratic discourse as opposed to civic (national) education, which insufficiently fosters social cohesion through values of obedience and loyalty towards authorities. While research on citizenship education in Muslim contexts exists as in the examples shown above, the literature seems to have paid less attention to the topic of "civic engagement". McIlrath, Lyons, and Munck (2012) claimed that there is a need for empirical research on civic engagement from different educational traditions. Pohl (2006) reports on one case study of formal civic engagement initiatives in the context of Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) designed to promote values such as nonviolence, democracy and human rights using classical Islamic texts.

2.4.2 The tension between citizenship and religion

The concept of citizenship as allegiance to one country goes back at least to the political entity of the city state in ancient Greece. Written over 2000 years ago, Sophocles' tragedy Antigone, for example, examined the tension between two conflicting obligations: sacred longstanding traditions and temporal laws (MacKay, 1962). In contemporary multicultural democracies, the issue of "citizenship" and individual religious rights is accentuated.

Tensions develop when states seek to regulate religious practices or, vice versa, when religious groups seek to challenge pluralism and freedom of expression (Rosenblum, 2000). Rosenblum argues that, in most cases, religious groups do not have explicit theocratic goals; rather they operate within the system and even collaborate with other faith communities to retain their civil liberties when the state attempts to limit certain cultural-religious practices. These forms of civic engagement and alliance-building practised by religious groups have the beneficial effect of preventing potential abuses of power. Many Muslims in the West dynamically participate in democratic politics by joining

debates, campaigning, lobbying, volunteering etc., even without necessarily being fully committed to the concept of democracy (El-Haj, Bonet, Demerath, & Schultz, 2011).

Exchange between secular and religious groups represents a healthy way to promote debate and inclusion. However, the core question remains of whether there is an “overlapping consensus” to justify the idea of liberal citizenship from a religious perspective (March, 2011). As March argues in his analysis of liberal citizenship and Islamic legal theory, Islamic textual traditions discuss “citizenship” when dealing with a number of practical issues, for example, the permissibility of Muslims to travel and take residence in non-Muslim lands and the rights and duties of non-Muslim minorities under Muslim rule (Ibid). Various positions overlapping the ideal concept of liberal citizenship emerge from these discussions (and are still debated to this day) by adapting orthodox rulings to modern circumstances.

In popular Muslim discourse, the perceived compatibility of Islam with democracy broadly follows the six Islamic orientations and responses to modern education outlined in the previous section. Secularists tend to reject the influence of religion in political affairs, while modernists tend to maintain that Islam is inherently democratic. This latter view is often articulated using Islamic notions such as *shūrā* (consultation), *ikhtilāf* (validity of differing views), intellectual autonomy and the lack of a formal clerical hierarchy in Islam (Abou El Fadl, 2005). Abou el Fadl argues these are “apologetic” and anachronistic arguments that can divert attention from asking serious questions about the role of authority, pluralism and citizenship in contemporary Islam. “Dangerous”, because, he argues, if democracy becomes an integral part of faith, then it becomes difficult to freely criticise and modify its workings.

Another position comes from those who conceptualise Islam as a complete system of governance that has nothing to do with democracy, which is associated with *kufr* (rejection of belief in God). Those who adhere to this position are likely to either engage in democratic processes (voting, writing to

their representatives, engaging in debates) while considering democracy incompatible with Islam or refusing to engage in formal democratic processes altogether. Other scholars claim that engaging in democratic politics is permissible in the absence of alternatives. Finally, a minority of Muslims with militant tendencies will proactively reject democratic practices and "disengage" from mainstream society as much as it is possible. The idea of Islam as a "complete system" conceptualised by influential intellectuals such as S. Qutb and Mawdudi, is an inherently modern concept, a product of the modern nation state (Hallaq, 2014), where Islam simply becomes a logical replacement for other ideologies (communism, liberalism, or patriotism).

Some authors point out that the model of government that aligns best with the understanding of Islamic rule of the past would be a sort of secular state with religious communities implementing their own rules on specific religious issues while the vast majority of laws applicable to the whole territory are unrelated to any religious verdict (An-Naim, 2008). Within this framework, problems might arise when the practices of one community clash with those laws, e.g. cultural practices that cause physical harm to individuals.

Waghid (2011) advances the position that Islamic doctrine can be compatible with democratic citizenship and cosmopolitanism, but only if Islam is taught in "maximalist" terms. He defines Islamic education alongside a minimalist-maximalist continuum with potential for both insular and inclusive values. He seeks to conceptualise a type of Islamic education that promotes inclusive, democratic and cosmopolitan values, departing from the tripartite definition of Islamic education as *tarbiya* (nurturing, upbringing), *taʿlīm* (instruction) and *taʾdīb* (good action) (2011, 2014). Relevant to this study (as will become clear in the data analysis section of this thesis), *taʾdīb* is interpreted in extremely different ways, from the "disciplining of the mind, body and soul" and "teaching of good manners" (Hussain, 2004, p. 318) to social activism (Davids & Waghid, 2014). Inspired by concepts such as *shūrā* and *maṣlaḥa (*primacy of public interest), a maximalist understanding of Islam gives precedence to the

overarching guidance and broad moral principles. These guiding principles are considered a demonstration of the potential compatibility and adaptability of Islamic creed, law and spirituality to contemporary democratic and cosmopolitan thought and practice (Duderija, 2011; Safi, 2003).

2.4.3 Where political engagement and Islamic education meet: the case of political radicalisation

In the past two decades it has been common to hear the media talk about "radicalisation" and "extremism" in relation to Muslims and/or Islam. These terms are usually defined as activities that may lead to politically motivated violence carried out by Muslims in the name of Islam. Often, online manifestations of militant activities (through propagation, recruitment and so on) are so much at the centre of public discourse on Islam online that all other forms of religiously inspired or secular activism carried out by Muslims appear insignificant even though in reality they represent the ordinary majority. I am discussing Islamic militancy here for two reasons: (i) to acknowledge that discussions on Muslim political engagement in the media and political debates (perhaps to a lesser extent in academia) have focused on radicalism and extremism and (ii) because education (in particular, the relationship between secular and religious education) plays an important role in the radicalisation process or in framing acceptable forms of civic engagement.

Some argue that *madrasas* in certain contexts have been sites of radicalisation, for example in Pakistan (Coulson, 2004) and Afghanistan (Baiza, 2014) at particular historical times. Baiza looked at textbooks funded, developed, and distributed by countries such as the USA, the UK and Saudi Arabia, which employed Islamic sources to justify and incite fighting against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In a post 9/11 context, Coulson (2004), cites examples from Pakistani *madrasas* to claim that these schools are sites of indoctrination that encourage hatred towards the West.

Noor, van Bruinessen, and Sikand (2008), on the other hand, took a very different position, arguing that the claims made against traditional *madrasas* were often based on anecdotal evidence. Bergen and Pandey (2005) also argued that most people who adopt extremist ideas have not usually received traditional Islamic education (with some notable exceptions). Studies on the education of convicted terrorists have shown that most people who engage in extremist activities hold ordinary university degrees and are generally well educated and upwardly mobile (Vertigans, 2009).

In the context of Pakistan, Dorschner and Sherlock (2011) also pointed out that the intolerant views reproduced in state schools combined with high unemployment rates increase the likelihood that disillusioned graduates will embrace militancy. For example, Vertigans explains that many militants "have not been educated at militant institutions or by radical teachers. They are assimilating the discourse from other sources" (Vertigans, 2009, p. 29). These "other sources" are often online, in the form of Islamic informal learning networks that Muslims pursue to supplement secular education.

A second theory suggests that comprehensive Islamic training can help prevent radicalisation and that the increased secularisation of academic institutions may make young people more susceptible to radical influences (Afrianty 2012; Rehman 2014). For instance, Rehman presented the thought of Pakistani scholar Taqi Usmani, who criticised attempts to introduce modern subjects in the *madrasa* and called, as a remedy against extremism, for the reformation of the medieval curriculum to cultivate in-depth understanding of the Arabic language and Islamic texts. It is perhaps too simplistic to claim that "in-depth knowledge of Islam" alone can prevent radicalisation, but it gives a sense of the earlier discussions which suggest that it is the quality of education that counts; for example, whether education allows for a flexible and open-ended exploration of the sources and encourages understanding of different points of views and nuances of language. There may be cases where in-depth study can put excessive focus on rigid attachment to technicalities, for example.

Afrianty (2012) looked at the case of the Indonesian State Islamic University (IUN) because a few of its alumni had participated in the Bali bombings. Afrianty's study analysed possible factors that could have influenced radicalisation at an otherwise well-known liberal Islamic institution. The author identified potential roots of radicalisation in some key demographic, social and academic changes at IUN: higher enrolments of students who attended secular schools and had little or no Islamic "traditional training", the "introduction of Western social methodology as a tool for understanding Islamic knowledge" (p. 140) and the addition of new secular departments.

These changes were part of wider national reforms that gave significantly more space to progressive intellectuals and critical methodologies in order to tackle the rise of militant forms of political Islam (Kraince, 2009; Noor, 2008). Afrianty (2012) argued that contrary to the students who had attended Islamic schools and were already well-grounded in Islamic source materials, the new secularly educated student population was less prepared on the subject and therefore generally more "vulnerable to being influenced by radical teachings" that penetrated campus life outside the classroom, through student political organizations (p. 42). With this case study, Afrianty countered the stereotypical image of the traditional Islamic school as a "hotbed" of extremism and suggested that radicalisation is likely to occur when students are not adequately trained in religious studies. In this context, the introduction of secular and modern approaches to studying Islam from the top down resulted in a counter-intuitive outcome, i.e. the spread of radical ideas at the grassroots level.

Closely related to this, the role of teaching methods in the development of religiosity is an important aspect of this debate. Usually, innovative, student-centred approaches that encourage critical exploration of texts are contrasted with "conventional" top-down, teacher-centred approaches that focus on the inculcation of specific beliefs. Many combinations of these two models exist. In her study of Indonesian Islamic schools, Tan (2012) discussed the role of

critical thinking in the development of citizenship skills in the classroom. She argued that:

> An Islamic school should provide a learning environment where students do not learn just by rote or memorisation … They need to be equipped with the intellectual tools of inquiring, reflecting, questioning, and deliberating. (Tan, 2012, p. 88)

Although “rote” learning and “memorisation” are often used as synonyms, there is a difference in meaning: “rote” means “memorisation without understanding” while “memorisation” also includes some comprehension (P. Anderson et al., 2011). While memorisation seems to have some advantages, e.g. it aids the internalisation of information, which can then be retrieved at any time for reflection and guidance (Gent, 2013), critical thinking skills are thought to be closely related to a willingness to understand theology in a way that is open to or, simply tolerant of, differing beliefs, opinions and practices.

This very idea of “tolerance” is a key point of divergence between liberal and orthodox tendencies (Merry & De Ruyter, 2009). Advocates of liberal education criticise the “banking system of education” that is based on “closed-fist”, teacher-centred pedagogies (Meijer, 2009) because it tends to encourage students to acquire fixed “control beliefs” acritically. Control beliefs are beliefs that are “not subject to examination, doubt and criticism” and that we use to “determine how we look at everything” (Tan, 2012, pp. 14-18). Tan explains that the greater number of “control beliefs” someone has, the more likely this person is to hold “us-versus-them” worldviews. Thus, the more we are open to question the beliefs we hold, the more open we are to entertain opposing beliefs and counterarguments and even change our mind.

On the other side of the spectrum, student-centred approaches (sometimes called “open-hand” or “opinion market” pedagogies) can facilitate the formation of skills that develop critical thinking skills and facilitate engagement with a multiplicity of points of view, reasoned deliberation and intellectual autonomy (Mejía & Molina, 2007). These skills are, these authors argue, intuitively more

likely to cultivate democratic consciousness. As Tan suggested (2014), however, it is the actual number of alternative views dynamically presented and analysed in the curriculum that significantly enhances the formation of critical reflection and deliberation, therefore inhibiting the formation of rigid and insular worldviews and behaviours.

Sahin (2013) researched these critical issues in Islamic education from both a theological and empirical perspective and denounced current practices that deny students a relaxed, safe space to spontaneously question their own religion. As part of his research, he conducted a survey of younger students and collected observations of student exchanges in the classroom during a Master's course in Islamic Education (at Markerfield Institute, UK) as they were introduced to critical approaches to education e.g. the writings of Dewey and Freire. His students were mostly former *dār al-ʿulūm* graduates (alumni of traditional Islamic seminaries) and showed signs of a "foreclosed model of religious subjectivity", which means essentially the presence of a great number of "control beliefs".

Throughout the master's course Sahin's students were asked to take a step back and reflect on what "Islamic education" was for and how it could be taught differently. While some students took this approach with suspicion, others admitted that they had never thought about, and now realised, the importance of knowing what pupils actually "do with the knowledge they acquire". Sahin (2013) argued therefore that in between "memorisation" and "application" of knowledge there must be an open phase of exploration and questioning, and that the lack thereof can have contrasting consequences: it can lead to estrangement from religion altogether or insularity.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed three key elements of this study: (i) major Islamic orientations and responses to modern education (approaches that influence Islamic education and the interpretation of Islam), (ii) the impact of new media technologies (the historical setting of this research), and (iii) the role of education in reproducing political ideas (the analytical focus of this research).

In the first section, I provided a broad account of the different Islamic orientations that exist within Sunni Islam today and gave some examples of how new media communications facilitate exchanges of ideas between groups and across Islamic orientations. In the second section, I looked at the intersection between education, authority and new media and, based on a selection of the existing literature, I argued that the landscape of religious authority has changed dramatically with the introduction of modern mass education and new media technologies. I also presented some examples of new interpreters and debates occurring on these social media platforms and, finally, I offered a brief overview of the field of e-learning.

In the third section, I looked at the role that religion plays in the reproduction of civic and political ideas and the tensions that exist between religious allegiances and conceptions of citizenship within the framework of the nation state. I argued for the need to study Islamic political ideas outside the framing of radicalisation and extremism and provided examples of literature on civic engagement in higher education to show how specific definitions of citizenship and civic engagement are reproduced through education. The next chapter is an in-depth discussion of the case studies, the process of gaining access to the field, the advantages and challenges of doing research online, and a few ethical consideration with regard to the entire research process.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This thesis explores two Islamic e-learning institutes that can be defined as being "traditionalist" in outlook. Within these two settings, I look at two sets of classes on the life of Prophet Muhammad, commonly known as the *sīra*. In addition to the classes, I have also looked at the video materials published by the two institutes on social media. The aim of the research is to explore the civic and political ideas that were extrapolated from the *sīra* as it was narrated by the instructors in these online settings. To achieve this goal, I used multiple data sources and methods to generate the data, namely audio, video, and written materials from the two courses.

To analyse the data, I first used a grounded theory approach to generate categories (themes) from the lectures. I focused on the themes that would be relevant to the research questions. After identifying these key themes, I gathered new data to develop these initial categories theoretically. Rather than remaining confined to the two institutes, I often let insights from the data guide me to other online environments (Islamic and beyond) and literature in order to deepen my understanding of the themes. By drawing differences and similarities with other narratives about the themes I identified, I ultimately sought to build a picture of the wider theoretical possibilities for each of these themes.

The aim of this study was not to build a profile of the two instructors, of two sets of classes or of two institutes, but to understand how ideas developed and how they sit within broader theoretical debates. Throughout the analytical process, I was also influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in terms of being conscious of power relations that exist through the use of everyday language and the need to analyse language use with the wider sociopolitical context in

mind. It is for this reason that I also use examples from social media for insights into the categories generated during the data collection phase.

This research study also takes a particular approach to the material found on social media. In addition to academic literature, I sometimes quoted talks, podcasts and public social media posts by academics available online to highlight the breadth of resources that people can access today. I also wanted to show in practice that the distinction between community-based and academic engagement with Islam and between faith-based and secular education is blurred by various combinations of two. Secular and religious approaches are in constant dialogue with each other through people and networks. In the "physical world", this is exemplified by the formation of "hybrid institutions", like Muslim colleges, which tend to be more flexible in terms of curricular and pedagogical choices, open to welcome non-Muslim experts and also to offer an "open door policy" (like Islamic e-learning institutes) (Shah, 2019).

In Chapter 2, I talked about two actors competing in the Muslim public sphere: new intellectuals and traditional scholars. By quoting from the "academic websphere", I acknowledge that there is a third category, overlapping the other two, which plays an important role in shaping meanings and definitions *about* and *within* Islam. This third category consists of academics (Muslim and non-Muslim) affiliated with secular institutions whose presence and work is either known (or perhaps at times just "overheard") or actively debated by Muslim publics, social media influencers and faith leaders/scholars. It could be argued that academic engagement with Islam contributes significantly to the process of understanding Islam and Muslim identity among Muslims online.

I believe my choice of including social media across these three categories blurs the distinction between academic literature (the "theory") and the fieldwork experience (the "data") to the point where this distinction is hard to maintain. In theory, thanks to the internet, I could potentially gain a modest understanding of the academic field of Islamic Studies almost exclusively by listening to

podcasts, watching online lectures and conference recordings, and following academics engaging in debates on social media. By navigating informal online spaces and networks, it is possible to capture key academic trends and arguments (and importantly why they are being made). This is perhaps an exaggeration. For example, I am unlikely to gain an in-depth understanding of an academic monograph from a podcast interview – nothing can replace in-depth engagement with a text. Yet this type of online engagement does add a new layer of meaning to the formal literature and helps uncover its significance (or insignificance) at the grassroots level. This example shows the importance of researching the informal educational value of the internet and its political implications.

While much of the research on Islamic education is devoted to its history and sociology, which includes, for example, an analysis of the different approaches to studying Islam and the career pathways of Islamic studies graduates, much less has been written specifically about how the curricular contents and interpretative practices employed produce civic and political ideas. As noted in the previous chapter, when the focus is political engagement, it often serves the purpose of refuting or supporting arguments that portray the traditional Islamic school as a potential locus of radicalisation (Tan, 2012). The methodology used in this thesis points to the need for a new framing that does not restrict the conversation to only issues related to radicalisation and extremism. As a study inspired by grounded theory methodology, the issue of extremism, therefore, features only inductively in the analysis and only to the extent that it appears in the data.

With all of this in mind, in this chapter, I will describe the research questions, explain the methodology, describe the research settings, and finally discuss some key ethical issues faced before and during the research process. In the following section, I will describe how the answers to these research questions offer an original account that can enrich our understanding of wider contexts and dynamics in the fields of Islamic education and new media.

3.1 Comparative case study research

This research is a multiple case study that aims to examine the *sīra* classes on the same subject offered at two separate institutes. The two institutes (A and B) were chosen because they seemed fairly "representative" of the Islamic orientation that I called "traditionalism" in Chapter 2. The academic *sīra* module at Institute C was selected to provide an additional layer of comparison and enrich the analysis of the courses at Institutes A and B. However, it was not analysed in its own right because of its characteristics as an established secular, academic institute.

This multiple case study is exploratory, that is, it looks at a phenomenon that has not been extensively explored in the academic literature (i.e. private Islamic e-learning institutes). It is also descriptive because it describes and critically analyses the content of the classes to identify the ways in which Islamic resources (verses, narrations, scholarly opinions, poems, articles, etc.) are presented and made relevant to Muslim audiences today. The use of a multiple case study approach is helpful to provide a picture of a broader phenomenon (in this case, traditionalism) and can also help to identify some differences within this trend.

Nevertheless, the data represents only a sample of two relatively small cases, so generalisations (even across whole institutes) should be discouraged. It is important to maintain a grasp on the detail while keeping in mind that the insights gained from this type of qualitative research could increase our knowledge of wider phenomena (Miller, 2011). For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the contextual specificity of the sample and those elements that may be "representative of broader patterns" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 178). In the case of this research, there are various potential levels of generalisation:

1. *Implications for the study of religion and civic education in general*. The case studies can enrich our understanding of the relationship between education and the development of political consciousness.
2. *Contribution to the sociology of contemporary Islamic education and the significance of transnational, computer-mediated learning*. The case studies offer an insight into the world that Muslims who navigate online environments experience in search of sacred knowledge.
3. *Contribution to our understanding of traditionalism.* Both institutes A and B are educational organizations built upon similar principles. They represent fairly "representative cases" of a general trend. They have distinctive features, but also share common goals and themes.

Here, I recognise that social realities are always changing because of fluctuating social, political and economic circumstances. The key to understand "orthopraxy" (any religious phenomenon that community members claim to be the correct way to worship) in general does not lie in the fixed characteristics of a group or a religious orientation but in the dynamic interaction between the (literary, theological or legal) texts and people's understanding and practice of the texts, which are often mediated by religious leaders, fellow co-religionists, the media and other societal groups. This study therefore seeks to focus on the interactions between the texts, people and interpretations, rather than on one or the other.

3.2 Introduction to the case studies

In this section, I describe some characteristics of the two main institutes where I conducted fieldwork and a brief description of Institute C. Some information is omitted to maintain their anonymity. In Chapter 2, I have already highlighted in broad terms how I classify these two institutes as belonging to the orientation

that I called “traditionalism”. I also explained that this trend seeks to revive premodern scholarship found within the schools of Islamic thought.

Even though the institutes belong in broad strokes to the same trend, they follow two different approaches to the textual sources and two different ways of narrating the *sīra*, which resulted in different opinions on a variety of issues. The founder of Institute A, though also of South Asian heritage, had a traditional education in the Middle East and is based in North America. On the other hand, the instructor at Institute B, who is based in the UK, was influenced by South Asian culture and the *madrasa* teachings received at a traditional *dār al-ʿulūm*. Both can be said to belong to the Hanafi school of legal thought within Islam. However, both institutes offer courses that teach Islam according to different schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Institute B does so progressively – starting from one school and progressing to others, while Institute A provides the option of choosing a pathway according to one or another school of law.

These plural approaches are not unique; this can also happen in some institutes that claim or are known to be Salafi. This is where lines become blurred, especially when organisations omit labels to describe their orientation. One key difference between Institute A and B is that Institute A emphasises spiritual practice and festivals like the Prophet’s birthday (*mawlid*) while Institute B does not. Considering the intellectual heritage of Institute B, this suggests that Institute B has some Deobandi and/or Salafi tendencies because these orientations tend to consider the *mawlid* an innovation that either contradicts or adds to the Qurʾan and Sunna (Brown, 2015).

3.2.1 An Introduction to Institute A

Institute A is a North American organization dedicated to the study of “mainstream classical Islam” founded by a scholar of South Asian origin. I first came across Institute A after enquiring in a Facebook group about suggestions for *madhhab*-based learning institutes online. It so happened that after posting

my request I had also become interested in a thread that discussed the permissibility of following *Salafis* in prayer. There, I happened to receive some answers from a group moderator who later introduced me to Institute A, where he was a teaching assistant.

Here, I report a "thick description" of the exchanges I had with this person because they offer a vivid and personal introduction to Institute A and some positions that I encountered during the fieldwork experience. The exchanges also symbolically represent two points discussed in Chapter 2, namely how Muslims move intellectually across orientations and the Islamic networking that regularly occurs in online spaces.

With this person, what was originally a couple of questions asked in a public group on Facebook quickly turned into long conversations via private chat. This is not unusual, especially if a group member wants to write more at length on a topic or provide more personal advice. This person told me about his journey to Islam (he is a convert). At the beginning of his experience, he had attended *Salafi* circles, but later, in his quest for knowledge, shifted to "orthodox mainstream Islam". He heavily criticised the teachings of, for example, the Online Islamic University (now Online International University), a Salafi institute.

His criticisms of Salafism covered several issues related to creed and jurisprudence. In fact, this person's very identity as a traditionalist seemed shaped in opposition to Salafism, of which he had had a negative experience. He explained to me, for example, that Salafis criticise mainstream Sunnis (traditionalists) for limiting themselves to only one school of law, when, in his own experience, traditionalists navigate across different schools of law. The key difference for him is that traditionalists want to know which school the scholars they are listening to adhere to. For example, this person related to me that it was in fact a Hanafi scholar who advised him to study from a respected Maliki scholar and that the process of choosing one school was mainly incidental, dependent on which scholars were physically closest and most accessible to

him. He felt instead that in his experience Salafis tend to limit themselves to studying a very low number of scholars (past and present).

In his interactions with different groups, he realised that the Salafis he was in contact with did not know scholars outside their limited list of “approved” scholars. My interlocutor then explained that the only reason he thought Salafi institutes offer classes on specific schools of law was to attempt to branch out of the Hanbali school (which represents the intellectual lineage of Salafism). On the same chat conversations, this person also criticised the egalitarisation of knowledge espoused by Salafis. He supported the idea that knowledge should be a monopoly of qualified and classically trained scholars and that lay Muslims should follow them closely instead of directly reading from books. Studying independently from the sources and deriving rulings from them – through the opinions articulated by traditional scholars of the past – should be done by the most knowledgeable. Traditionalist Islamic e-learning serves to counter auto-didacticism by reinforcing the distinction between scholars and laypeople to the extent that laypeople should not reach conclusions about religious matters independently.

Among his other critiques, there was also the idea, which is espoused by some Salafi preachers, that Muslims should synthetise the Islamic opinions of all the schools of law. He explained that the different schools were based on principles that could not be reconciled. That was why they became distinct schools in the first place. The idea of emphasising established traditional schools within Sunni Islam extends not only to jurisprudence and creed but also spirituality. My informant, for example, explained to me that the “whole identity” of past scholars should be taken into consideration, not only for their theological or legal positioning. Accordingly, scholars were publicly known by the name of the school (e.g. al-Hanafī, al-Shāfiʿī etc), followed by their school of creed (e.g. al-Māturīdī or al-Ashʿarī etc) *as well as* the name of the Sufi (spiritual) school (e.g. al-Qādirī, al-Nasqsbandī etc.).

During these conversations, I visited the website of institute A and emailed the course instructor of the *sīra.* After explaining my research, I received his consent to proceed with the study and later signed up to the course, which gave me immediate free access to the lectures. Coincidentally, the Facebook chat I had with an individual connected to this institute set the stage to help me understand how "traditional" or "orthodox" Islam set itself apart from other orientations, especially vis-à-vis the Salafi movement, which had been the original topic of this research. In total, at Institute A, I attended the "biography of the Prophet" as a registered student, as well as several YouTube lecture series suggested in the institute's regular newsletter on the theme of activism in Islam and the "noble qualities of the Prophet" (*shamāʾil*) suggested in the regular newsletter. These lectures were given by different scholars. Some resources promoted by institute A sent me to lectures organised by other organisations North America.

The "biography of the Prophet" at Institute A consisted of nearly twenty-eight separate one-hour classes (audio lectures), twenty-four of which were downloaded from the webpages of the courses and fully transcribed manually. Transcribing manually was useful because it gave me the opportunity to pause and make notes when I found passages of particular interest. The webpage of the course was essentially a list of lectures that the students should listen to in chronological order. Four of these classes were live sessions where students had the opportunity to interact with the instructor. Occasionally, I also listened to lectures from the same institute on YouTube. For these YouTube lectures I simply took notes or stored the automatic transcriptions of relevant passages whenever I felt it was necessary. The course page had also a forum, which was frequented by a few engaged students who asked questions directly to the instructor. The instructor always answered all the students' questions, requests for clarification and doubts. As part of the research process, I conducted an interview with the instructor of the biography class at Institute A (Instructor A), who only answered questions pertaining to the course. He felt he could not

answer any questions about the institution in general, as he was not heavily involved in the organisation (as he was also involved with other Islamic educational organisations).

My attempts to contact the director and founder of Institute A for an interview were initially successful, to the point that I arranged a time for a Skype call with him. However, after requesting to read my questions in advance, the founder of institute A cancelled the interview and never replied to any of my emails again. I have no indication of a reason as to why this happened.

All the information I have about Institute A therefore comes from its website. Instructor A remained open throughout the process to answer my questions about the prophetic biography course and beyond. In his answers, he emphasised that his knowledge was limited and defined himself as a "student of knowledge" (by which he meant someone who is studying under a particular scholar). Like my initial informant, the instructor of the prophetic biography at Institute A is also a convert to Islam. During our interview, he identified with Sufism and the teachings of his mentor, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, a Sufi scholar, though this scholar was never mentioned in the classes.

3.2.2 An introduction to Institute B

Institute B is an e-learning institute that was already known to me prior to the beginning of the research process. The founder of Institute B is a respected scholar. Institute B seemed to me an interesting case study because I could not easily place it in a definite category. It seems also to be "traditionalist" in nature, by which I mean that it seeks to revive the traditional study of Islam by offering "classical training" (an *alimiyyah* course to train Islamic scholars). One of the key differences between Institute A and Institute B, which will become clear in the following chapters, is that Institute B is more academically inclined, that is, its structure resembles a university, and subjects are taught in more depth. It also seems to integrate some modern research methodologies into the classical

study of Islam or seeks otherwise to relate to methods and concepts in modern academia.

The process of gaining access to Institute B was more complex and "messy" than my experience with Institute A. While I was able to explain my research and gain approval via email and over the phone with the gatekeepers of the organisation, overall it seemed that the gatekeepers were mainly interested in "selling" the courses (i.e. registering students and arranging payment). The fact that I was carrying out doctoral research did not receive much attention, very little was asked, and after I paid the course fees, I was given access to the online platform, and they never contacted me again. The whole experience of accessing the course did not feel like much more than a financial transaction.

During a phone conversation, the representative of this organisation approved my request to conduct research at the institute (which was later confirmed via email) on the condition that in addition to the "biography of the Prophet" I also registered for an advanced one-year course on *ḥadīth* (traditions containing sayings of Prophet Muhammad) at five times the price of the *sīra*.

The gatekeeper justified this request by explaining that attending this additional course would give me a better foundation and more holistic experience of being a student at the institute. This more expensive course would include live lessons, while the course I had chosen consisted of video recordings of past lectures. At the time, I pointed out that the course was an "advanced" module usually taken at the end of the entire degree programme and that I was concerned I might not be able to follow it due to my poor knowledge of the subject. This is when I understood that despite the fact that the entire programme was organised from a beginners' level to more advanced levels, people anywhere and from any background could purchase any module at any time, regardless of skills and prior knowledge of the subject.

The opportunities to interact with the teacher at Institute B, despite the costs, were more limited than at Institute A. Institute A had a forum, where students could ask questions, and live classes, which were frequented by a minority of

students. At Institute B, on the other hand, students could only ask questions during the live lectures, which meant interaction between students was not possible for the recorded *sīra* course I had chosen. During my fieldwork at Institute B, I made a few attempts to contact the instructor of the *sīra* course. These attempts were all unsuccessful. At times, I received replies from assistants to say that the lecturer was unwell or busy and unable to answer my questions. After a few attempts, I stopped trying. This is mainly because, I thought at the time, as an ethnographic project my aim was to capture the student experience offered by the institute and, clearly, the programme did not entertain the possibility of student-teacher interaction outside the live lectures.

In terms of on-going contact and support between the institute and the students, at Institute B I never received an email or a call to ask me about my learning experience, whether I had any problems or questions or whether I had successfully completed all the modules. I was also never given an email address to contact the instructor in case I had any doubts about the course material. A few months into the academic year, I was added to an institute-wide sisters-only *WhatsApp* group, which gave me an insight into the lives and studies of women studying at Institute B; however, since I did not have permission to record data from students, I did not use this *WhatsApp* group for this research project. Overall, at institute B opportunities for online interaction were limited (for the *ḥadīth* course) and non-existent (for the *sīra* course). The opportunities to receive academic support were not clearly defined at any point during the course. I knew that students who were enrolled in some modules had to take exams at the end of the year, but this did not apply to any of the courses I had chosen. I do not know how my experience at the institute would have been had I enrolled in other courses.

My final contact with Institute B was the evening before the first day of classes at the beginning of the following academic year, in September 2016. A representative for the institute phoned me to ask if I wanted to sign up to any modules. On that occasion I was also not asked about my academic progress

or learning experience of the previous year. This experience helped me reflect on the financial aspect of Islamic adult education, something that deserves further exploration in future studies. Running and recording courses, devising the curriculum, maintaining the online learning platforms, employing administrative staff, tutors and instructors at various levels entail substantial costs. The case studies had two different financial strategies. Institute A relied on charitable donations and volunteers to keep courses free, while Institute B clearly adopted a more formal financial arrangement to cover the costs and, maybe for this reason, provided a more structured curriculum and more advanced courses.

In total, at Institute B I "attended" three courses: the biography of the Prophet (eight video lectures), the "*ḥadīth* commentary" class (weekly classes over one year) and a one full-day course on Islamic politics (all for a fee). All these classes had the same instructor. This instructor talked to the camera and to the students who were attending the classes in person. I manually transcribed the video recording of *sīra* classes and partially transcribed relevant excerpts of the "Islamic politics" classes. I also took some notes and transcribed short extracts of some *ḥadīth* classes too. At Institute B, transcribing manually was particularly useful because the instructor occasionally recited excerpts from books in other languages. At times, I was able to transcribe and translate from Arabic when the lecturer provided no translation (as I will discuss in the next few chapters). Urdu passages where often translated by the instructor.

3.2.3 A case for further comparison: Institute C

Institute C is a mainstream secular research university based the UK that was established at the beginning of the twentieth century. This university offers undergraduate degree programmes in Islamic Studies. I decided to attend relevant parts of the prophetic biography course at this university during my fieldwork experience at Institutes A and B because I wanted to explore different

ways in which the prophetic biography can be taught and the political ideas that could surface at a secular institution compared to the faith-based institutions in this study. These *sīra* classes ran onsite and I received full consent to participate directly from the course tutor. As I collected fieldwork data from the two Islamic e-learning institutes, the experience at Institute C offered an insightful comparative element to analyse and develop the categories emerging from the fieldwork.

3.3 Doing research online: practical issues

In this section, I will explore two important sets of issues that I have encountered while conducting research online. First, for social scientists the internet has become a potentially massive research field or laboratory where data is available in abundance. There are many ways to collect information online, from designing surveys, conducting online interviews, or participating in virtual reality to collecting data readily available in forums and videos. The possibilities are endless. For this reason, in addition to setting methods, it is essential to *set clear boundaries* to an online research project. I will outline how I have done this for the case studies in this thesis.

Secondly, it is important to understand how online behaviour differs from offline face-to-face interaction (Joinson, 2005). Some evidence suggests that people can be more open and provide more information in online contexts of anonymity. But in online research, some aspects of communication and contextual information (which are important to understand the physical conditions people live in) are lost. There are therefore both advantages and disadvantages to this research methodology.

3.3.1 Setting the boundaries

One good practice of conducting research online is setting clear boundaries so that the size of the research "field" does not become unmanageable. This is partly because the virtual field can be located on multiple websites, blogs and forums and it can change and move fast from one platform to another (Boellstorff et al., 2012). For example, during my virtual fieldwork, the use of hyperlinks often led me to several websites of other organisations and social media platforms including YouTube videos and Facebook pages and profiles. As observed in the previous chapter, this is the reason why these learning institutions should be considered part of larger networks that connect people and organisations beyond national boundaries. This type of internet research can expand very fast, potentially faster than a physical research field.

Different techniques are used to delimit the boundaries of online studies (Hine, 2000). I have opted to focus exclusively on one course and one additional class per institute. The first course was directly related to the *sīra* and the second was preferably related to politics. This second course was selected during data analysis to expand my categories theoretically. Additional videos, articles and social media posts would only be taken into consideration if they added significant insight and enrich the categories found in my main data set. Setting boundaries allowed me to focus on particular examples provided in the classes while connecting these examples to broader debates within and across these Islamic networked spaces, aptly known as cyber Islamic environments (Bunt, 2018).

Nevertheless, this research remains limited for two main reasons: first, it does not acknowledge the extensiveness of the internet spaces that I could have potentially explored, which means this study is not a sociological analysis. It focuses on concepts and how they are interpreted in the classroom vis-à-vis wider debates. It is therefore preoccupied with hermeneutics. Secondly, the research offers only a snapshot of curricular content found in two online

learning realities. This research project does not intend to be a survey of the entire prospectus of the institutes; therefore, it is not a comprehensive review of the ideological, political and civic stances of the two case studies. It is possible therefore that within each institute political positions and ideas could be heterogeneous.

3.3.2 Online vs. offline behaviour

The famous maxim, attributed originally to Malinowski, that “what people say they do is not always the same as what they actually do” (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 141) emphasises the fact that behaviour can be studied better in context through participant observation. Relying solely on what people say they do can be misleading and cause the researcher to miss a wealth of information that the informant would not necessarily even think of relating to the researcher. Furthermore, people will relate what they perceive about their behaviour rather than their actual behaviour. Such a maxim becomes more complicated in relation to online research. What exactly are “context” and “culture” online? What’s considered behaviour that can be observed online? If I frequent a forum where people interact daily, for example, or listen to a talk uploaded by an Islamic scholar online, should that be considered exclusively “saying” or also “doing” something? This study is based on the underlying principle that “talk matters” because it fulfils a performative role (Austin, 1975). That is, “saying something” online also means “doing something”, performing a role that has civic and political value.

The internet also allows multi-tasking, which means that the researcher can only see and learn about what people are doing in one online space while they may be engaged in other offline and online activities invisible to the researcher. Internet research does not allow the researcher to capture the physical context in which people are situated when they interact online, therefore the context is limited to how people operate in one or more virtual spaces (Boellstroff *et al*

2012). Any information about the physical context comes only from what the participants wish to describe (i.e their perception of reality) online.

Some authors are of the opinion that using exclusively online methods for a research project is a “hazardous” and “uncertain” strategy, “not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of ethnographic context” (Orgard 2005: 52 quoting Paccagnella 1997). Abdel-Fadil (2011) showed how the analysis of websites alone can significantly reduce the researcher’s understanding of contextual information. For example, there is a large amount of “invisible knowledge” in the daily management of a website, such as back room editorial meetings where ideological tensions come to the surface, which can be captured more easily through physical fieldwork research than internet research. In this sense, Abdel-Fadil is right that there is very little a researcher can find out about the “back room” politics behind the curriculum of these e-learning institutes through internet research. Because I can see only what is shown to students, the idea has been to capture my experience as a student in an almost auto-ethnographic fashion. Another element that is missing from the current research is the experience of other students behind their computer screens, their immediate reactions to the classes, their lesson plans and everything else that they may be doing while listening to the instructors.

Instead of focusing on the limitations of this approach, Boellstroff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor (2012) take a more radical perspective on this issue. They make the argument that in online research, the internet researcher should re-define the concept of “cultural context” altogether. Contrary to the opinion that online data must be substantiated using offline data, these scholars see virtual realities as cultures in their own right, self-sufficient and independent. In other words, the research focus for them should be on the persona that the actors embody within the online environments they frequent (Guimaraes 2005: 152) rather than on the actual person in “real” life. In this way, the behaviour online (in our case the teaching) is to be taken for its performative value online on the other side of the

screen. In this study, I do not seek to assess whether what people *do* online transpires offline. This is certainly an area of investigation worth exploring in future research.

3.4 On anonymity and other ethical considerations

One of the key problems of online research is establishing whether content published online, including discussion forums or social media interactions, is to be considered private or public (Kozinets 2010). This is of particular importance in research with human subjects because, depending on the definition that is given to online spaces, different ethical guidelines apply.

Institutes A and B are two e-learning organisations that require their members to register on the website by providing basic information (name, surname, email address etc.) in order to enrol on a course of study. These two steps grant access to restricted content within the website. There are, therefore, two types of content available to the researcher. The first type consists of public lectures, “teasers”, blog posts and social media posts that are available without registration and the second is curricular content such as key texts and audio lectures, which are only available upon registration.

Institute A offers courses for free, so registering on the website and enrolling in a course is strictly a formality that requires no commitment from prospective students, which means that course content is widely available to anyone online. Institute B offers some free courses, but the main programme of study requires substantial financial investment; however, the institute does not have a strict admission process (e.g. proof of prior qualifications). In this sense, the content is widely available to those who can commit the money. Based on these observations, it remains unclear to what extent these online spaces should be considered private or public.

For the purpose of this research, I decided that the restricted e-learning areas should be treated as private spaces. Consequently, as is standard practice in most qualitative research (Gerrard, 2021), I have committed to keeping names (including usernames) and any other information that could potentially identify the individuals associated with the institute anonymous. Furthermore, to maintain the anonymity of the individuals concerned, I also decided to anonymise names in the data I collected on social media (for example, YouTube videos) that technically there would be no need to anonymise otherwise (as this material is available in the public domain). I provide reference to all other publicly available material that is not linked to either Institutes A or B.

Some may consider it unusual to anonymise websites that offer educational services online. Gerrard (2021), for example, says that "the attitude against anonymisation seems relatively unique to internet research" (p. 689). The assumption is perhaps that due to the nature of the medium (which relies on written content and images) there is generally less confidence – and no guarantee – that "what happens online", including conversations in closed forums or private chats, will remain private. In a physical school, unauthorised photos and recordings are usually considered a breach of privacy. On the contrary, online, screenshots and video recordings are ordinary currency, which is why some people protect themselves by using pseudonyms (which can become a unique identifier for the online persona and therefore in some cases may also need to be anonymised).

So, I took the decision to anonymise the two research sites partly to counter assumptions about the internet as a "public" space and the subsequent absence of privacy in people's "online social life". Let us think for a moment of online spaces (websites, forums, classes) as "buildings" in an enormous city. In physical spaces, we do not usually think that just because a "building" is visible from the outside, we are entitled to collect data and analyse the words and actions of the people who reside inside. As a result, addresses and exact

geographical locations of most research field sites in physical spaces are often anonymised too. In the online world, this equates to a web address. There are categories of physical places where the requirement to seek consent prior to recording and analysing data may be less apparent, such as public squares, stations, airports or supermarkets – "non-spaces" as Marc Augé (1995) called them in his famous essay by the same name. However, it is generally agreed that, from the moment a social researcher seeks permission to access a "site" or a "community" for research purposes, some protection ought to be guaranteed to the people being studied by way of anonymising any identifying information. Exceptions are made for public officials (Gerrard, 2021).

In this thesis, I would like to normalise the idea that – because people do all sorts of ordinary things online – not everything people do online should be considered automatically public, as if the internet were *always* a public square composed of ready-made data freely available to social researchers. The reality is more complex and ethical choices regarding anonymity depend on the nature and purpose of the research and the positionality of the author vis-à-vis the research topic and the study participants. Research projects on similar topics have opted to only anonymise individual participants. For example, in a study of self-regulation in Hindu online teaching practice, Ramanujan (2018) anonymised the names of individual monks (Monk 1, Monk 2, etc.), but not the websites. The key difference with this study is that, here, I am examining the curricular content within a specific module offered by two institutes and therefore maintaining the anonymity of the instructors would not be possible if I were to disclose the institute's names. Ramanujan's research topic was also less politically charged than the research topic on this thesis, which looks at the development of political ideas against the backdrop of over twenty years of public debates around islamophobia, securitisation and religious extremism that have greatly impacted Muslim communities.

In another study of spiritual growth in the online classes offered by a private university, Brigham Young University was identified by name while the names

of individual students were anonymised (Fryar et al., 2018). In this case, not only the topic of spiritual self-development was not politically charged, but the entire course would also not be easily accessible to the public. In addition, the online institutes in this study are extremely young and unaccredited and rely on the public image and popularity of their founding scholars to be in business. At the early stages, building an institute around the image of a scholar (as characteristic as it may be to build universities around the image of charismatic leaders) means that there is an element of vulnerability that does not quite exist in established brick and mortar universities that are part of larger, more powerful institutional structures, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Fryar et al., 2018) or the Catholic church (Porterfield, 2013). Because there are a diverse range of circumstances regarding institutional structures, oversight and accreditation bodies, public support and finances (in a nutshell, power dynamics), it is important to consider ethical issues on a case-by-case basis in relation to this broader political context.

Gerrard (2021) mentions that several ethical guidelines have been issued over the years by, for example *The Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR), the *British Psychological Association* and the *British Sociological Association*. These documents, Gerrard explains, place an emphasis on “social media users’ expectations of privacy” and reject “ethical universalism” in favour of an approach that carefully considers particular situations and narratives to the extent that it may even be necessary to anonymise pseudonyms and remove contextual information to meet these expectations. Because of the level of in-depth analysis of the two courses analysed in this thesis, and since the scholars featuring in this study do not hold power equivalent to a public official, I have decided to keep their names and the identity of the institutes where they work anonymous. Anonymity was used as a default position, which is a standard position for most in-person qualitative research, for several reasons, the most evident and compelling being that anonymity met the gatekeepers’ “expectations of privacy”.

In this study, there are instances where I break this "anonymity" rule. For example, at times I used examples of online talks by other individual scholars, social influencers from other institutes – all of whom I mention by name – to enrich the analysis of my case studies conceptually. The reason why I deemed this appropriate is because these marginal examples did not undergo the same level of examination as the two case studies. This leads to a second reason for maintaining anonymity. Writing a thesis dedicated entirely to one case study (or, in this case, two) without anonymising could be interpreted as a form of publicity. An agreement that excludes anonymisation would be more complex to maintain and, moreover, it could influence the research process and its outcomes in significant ways. As a researcher develops an agreement with her study participants, anonymity helps maintain a critical distance between the researcher and the researched (not without ethical issues, as I will describe shortly).

This is especially important when the researcher is an "insider" to the community – in this case, a Muslim emotionally and spiritually invested in understanding the ways Muslims study Islam in the contemporary world. In the case of the two private institutes, for example, agreeing to do away with anonymity could have led the researcher to feel obligated – out of gratitude towards the study participants – to portray a particular image of the institute. Or, alternatively, it may be that the study participants might feel they have a right to make specific requests over the portrayal of their educational spaces because their names are so prominent in the study, which would mean the researcher possibly feeling restricted in what she can say, or worse, compelled to comply in order to retain the consent of the study participants (who can withdraw at any time from the research process and demand all data to be destroyed).

In addition to ensuring some critical distance and thus setting boundaries that allow the exploration of issues, anonymity also protects the study participants in important ways. This research is an analysis of young, small, community-

based educational spaces, founded with the effort of volunteers and/or private donations. These institutes do not hold significant power. They are working to build a reputation within their communities and potentially broader society and rely on this reputation to continue to develop in the direction they want to. While the researcher ought to provide a fair representation and an objective critique (or, more precisely, utilise a necessarily subjective ethnographic experience and knowledge of the field to understand the phenomenon studied from different angles), the study participants have the right to engage in their work safely without feeling the publication of the research findings could potentially put them on trial in the public square. This is one issue that differentiates a piece of journalism from academic research, and I have tried to keep this in mind while writing this thesis.

Lastly, this research seeks to explore the epistemological assumptions, educational theories and civic ideas expressed in these grassroots educational spaces. It does not seek in any way to analyse the public-facing identity of the scholars and/or institutions associated to these spaces. Withholding the identity of the instructors has also helped maintain the original focus on ideas (and how they develop in the lectures) over personalities. Perhaps against the grain, I made a conscious decision to focus on the content of the lessons instead of on the image (or brand) that these scholars/institutes construct on social media, which is increasingly commodified and representative of “capitalist notions of self and community” (Pihlaja, 2018, p. 12).

Anonymity, however, comes at a considerable cost. One of the biggest disadvantages of anonymity is that it cannot be reconciled with a public recognition of the study participants as co-creators of knowledge. Anonymity, as well as the idea of sole authorship, does not allow the researcher to share the credit fairly among all who have contributed to this thesis. Social scientists construct their status as experts by examining and synthetising the expertise of study participants who most likely will never benefit from the study nor acquire status as a result of the same research. Social science research is therefore by

definition collaborative, and research methods are not usually designed to integrate collaborative tools that address the status gap between researcher and study participants. This problem demonstrates that social research and the entire academic system (on which our understanding of authorship, titles and awards are based) is heavily influenced by a certain understanding of private ownership, by social structures and by European “colonial” legacy and yet to develop in ways that allow a fair distribution of intellectual recognition and its associated status.

Another ethical challenge in online research is the physical distance that separates the researcher from the gatekeepers and the complete reliance on long-distance communication for seeking and maintaining informed consent. In online research it is difficult to ensure that the presence of the researcher is acknowledged at all times, in fact, the researcher can easily and unintentionally become an invisible observer, in internet jargon, a “lurker” (Browne, 2003). The invisibility of the researcher raises some ethical concerns in terms of ensuring consent is in place at all times, especially in contexts where there is not a high level of interaction and socialisation between members, as was the case in the two case studies. Because of these concerns, I decided that the data from the institutes would consist exclusively of the lessons with additional data drawn from publicly available videos, which did not require informed consent.

Finally, it is important that in any research process a balance is sought between the ethical responsibility of accurate reporting and the critique of the ideas found in the field. Throughout this research project, I have made efforts to look outwards at a variety of Islamic perspectives. This research aims to provide a good description of the curricular content and to encourage critical reflection on the political and civic ideas generated in the classroom. It asks how political and civic ideas found in Muslim contemporary discourse challenge, expand, enrich or deconstruct concepts used in wider society.

I am also sceptical about the possibility that any interpretative study such as this should be considered objective. Instead, I adopt the position that doing

research involves construing a reality with transparency and integrity. Because it is not possible to report the data set in its entirety or for other researchers to replicate this study by “reliving” particular moments in the field, I argue that there will always be some partiality in the way the findings are reported. Partiality can be mitigated by keeping a consistent record of the research process as well as being transparent about the criteria used to select data and report the findings.

3.5 Data collection tools and analysis

In this section, I describe the research plan and how the process of data generation took place. This research project used primarily observation of online lessons (live and recorded) and the transcription and analysis of audio and video material as a source of data. The type of observation that took place during fieldwork cannot be described as “participatory” since the e-learning platforms were not highly interactive in the first place.
As I will explain below, the *sīra* classes in the virtual classroom served to identify the key themes needed to answer the research questions. The three themes identified through data analysis form the basis of the data chapters, Interpretative Practices (Chapter 5), Contested Epistemologies and Status of Islamic Scholarship (Chapter 6), The Function of Islamic Education (Chapter 7) and Implications for Civil Rights, Pluralism and Social Change (Chapter 8) and Directions in Political Imagination (Chapter 9). Additional videos and documents produced by the institutes were consulted to triangulate the classroom data while videos and social media posts sourced outside the institutes were used to expand the themes theoretically, i.e. to enrich the categories. Triangulation is recommended to strengthen the validity of the research findings, which is good practice in case study research (Yin, 2003).

3.5.1 Observation of online spaces and the limited scope for virtual participant observation

Generally, participant observation should last a relatively lengthy period of time to be considered valuable (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Furthermore, participant observation, as the name suggests, should involve some form of interaction between the researcher and study participants, where the researcher participates in the activities of the community. Participant observation of these e-learning spaces should therefore have meant participating in the expected e-learning activities as any other student would. However, in the case of the two research sites, the ability to participate was minimal (as I explain shortly, it was limited to me engaging with gatekeepers). For this reason, “doing fieldwork” often meant exclusively observing the classes, i.e. watching videos, reading the forums. At both institutes I occasionally participated in the forums (web forum) or chats (on WhatsApp), both of which were relatively quiet, but because my research focus was on the content of the lectures, I did not make an effort to participate.

The “courses” were essentially a long list of video or audio recordings on a single webpage. Overall, I spent approximately six months doing “formal fieldwork” at Institute A and around nine months at Institute B. The type of research that I conducted however entailed mostly working with these recordings and therefore could not be defined as “participant” in the traditional sense of the word. Fieldwork therefore involved mostly listening to and transcribing the video and lecture material I found on the course webpage in isolation from other students. This was what the platform was designed to do. The recordings allowed me to listen to lectures again and again and therefore transcribe data easily. Often, periods of data transcription were interspersed with searches for references to names or ideas mentioned in the lectures or translations of passages recited in another language by the instructors. Occasionally, I would read comments or ask questions in the forum and

occasionally I attended the live Q&As (at Institute A). Observation also included following the news that appeared on the website and on the two institutes' newsletters. In traditional participant observation, the act of being physically present in a complex social situation requires the researcher to spend a considerable amount of time *being* in that social environment, taking notes and trying to capture complex interactions (as well as understanding one's presence in the space). With audio or video recordings, newsletters and webpages, there is not the same quality of contextual information available, the internet provides material that is ready to transcribe and analyse. In this sense, the contextual information is traded for an effortless documentation process, which, however, is at times less easy to manage due to the sheer quantity of material available. The function of the field changed during the research process: when the research started, fieldwork was about interacting with others in order to connect with gatekeepers, seek consent and learn about the institutes (making use of the internet as a *community*). Once I was settled in the field, the learning experience involved less interaction and more watching videos, following weblinks, consulting references, and reading the websites (making use of the internet as an *artefact*). Towards the end of the research project, it was again about contacting individuals to secure interviews, as I explained previously, at times unsuccessfully. The distinction between the internet as a "community" and as an "artefact" (Hine, 2000) overlaps here in interesting ways. The institutes' reliance on video and audio recordings shows that the internet is still used primarily as a repository of information to be transmitted to large audiences. The social experience connected to education, for example learning through discussions (in forums, or live group sessions), plays a limited part at these two institutes.

I observed more interactive teaching methods in the past. For example, before embarking on this study, when I attended the *sīra* module at the Islamic Online University (now International Online University), the instructor asked the class to form smaller groups ("breakout rooms") during a live session. The task was

to discuss with classmates and draw some lessons from the life of the Prophet that could be applied today. This online teaching method is commonly used in educational settings to encourage engagement with the material and learning through collaboration and dialogue, thus making learning more “student-centred”.

3.5.2 Description of the analytical process

The data analysis was inspired in part by grounded theory methodology in two ways: first, I generated categories directly from the data and, second, I sought definitions of the key ideas I wanted to explore directly from the data rather than relying on existing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This means, for example, that I searched for references to civic engagement in the data before consulting the existing academic literature. This allowed me to really focus on the data and limit how much the literature guided my analysis.

As shown in Table 3.1, each video and audio recording was first transcribed and coded in its entirety (Phase 2). In this phase of analysis, I tried to strike a balance between grouping identical and similar codes together and highlighting infrequent or non-recurrent themes. I did this to avoid overlooking concepts that may be conceptually significant with the view that recurrence does not necessarily mean relevance. After this initial thematic analysis, I selected extracts from each theme for further analysis. Subsequently, only those topics related to the research questions were selected for further analysis (Phase 3 of Table 3.1). All the themes generated from classroom data that explained *interpretative principles, processes practices, data sources and the role of knowledge and scholarship* were selected to form the basis of Chapters 5 and 6. Themes related to citizenship, civic and political engagement form the basis of Chapters 7 and 8. All themes that were related to government, the state, leadership and institutions form the basis of Chapter 9.

In-depth analysis of these topics allowed me to focus on the practices employed by the instructors to extrapolate meanings, construct arguments and narratives and contextualise their normative conclusions (Phase 4 of Table 3.1) as well as explore the categories conceptually by referring to literature and the wider context (Phase 5 of Table 3.1). The final stage of the research process involved summarising this information to draw meaningful findings.

Phase 1 Course selection	**Phase 2** Observation: generating codes (themes)	**Phase 3** Theme selection	**Phase 4** Microscopic analysis of selected themes	**Phase 5** Expanding categories	**Phase 6** Summary of findings

TABLE 3.1: THE STAGES OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

As an analytical strategy, I took inspiration from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for the microscopic analysis of selected passages. CDA analyses language as a “mode of social action” that simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by wider social structures, institutions and realities (Fairclough, 1995, p. 25). Unlike other analytical methods, including discourse analysis, CDA does not look at the text for the purpose of linguistic description alone; it seeks to identify how discourse defines, reproduces and defies existing institutional structures.

CDA is tied to notions of intellectual capital and hegemony (i.e. who owns the intellectual and social capital, what is deemed to be valid “knowledge”). Intellectual capital can be defined as all those resources that are considered “important” in any specific context; these are for example the command of technical jargon, specific knowledge and rhetorical ability. “Hegemony” instead expresses the idea that dominant groups claim access/monopoly to intellectual capital and use it to regulate the social world of subordinate groups. CDA focuses on the linguistic tools people use (often unconsciously) to establish power relationships and this is the reason this analytical framework fits well with my attempt to understand whether, in the process of bringing the *sīra* to

contemporary Muslims through e-learning, instructors make intellectual, civic and political statements as an act of resistance or compliance to the established *status quo* or draw boundaries between groups. I take the position, as developed by authors such as Apple (1979) that education is never neutral and neither is talk in general, which is the core assumption of CDA. The classes of the "biography of the Prophet" are understood here, undoubtedly problematically for some, as a form of "ideological positioning".

The settings where CDA as an analytical method has been applied are in great part institutional: the police, academia, hospitals, etc. CDA sees linguistic practices, from choice of vocabulary to turn taking, as inherently ideological. Ideology "involves the representation of 'the world' from the perspective of a particular interest" and "is manifested in content (i.e. meaning) and form" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 44). Fairclough explains that the "naturalised implicit propositions of an ideological character are pervasive in discourse" and "people are generally unaware of them and how they are subjected by/to them" (ibid: 22).

This method assumes that the "subject and wider social structures" are inherently interconnected, which entails that "the background materials", i.e. any contextual material that expounds on the data, become part of the analytical process too. Sometimes called *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality* (El Naggar, 2012), these ideas imply that the analysis of a text must be related to and can only be understood on the basis of other discourses occurring synchronously and historically in wider society.

For this reason, in the data chapters, I provide examples of wider debates taking places outside the institutes that can expand on the themes generated inside the institutes. For example, I frequently analysed passages from preachers and religious scholars in the online Islamic environments alongside the classroom data. In grounded theory methodology, these are sometimes called "far-out comparisons" (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The analytical experience was therefore not limited to the data found within the two e-learning institutes. The data was affected by a broader fieldwork experience that occurred as I continued to explore the online presence of several Muslim organisations and notable Muslim speakers. This is a useful way to enable the analysis to go beyond the particular to address wider issues relevant to these communities. By focusing on ideology, CDA "requires reference the immediate situation to the social institution (…) in that ideologies are by definition representations generated by social forces at these levels." (Fairclough, 1995, p. 45). I also found CDA's notion of "orders and disorders" useful to think of the instances in which actors comply or seek to resist implicit institutional norms (Wodak, 1996). This means that CDA as a technique tends to emphasise implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge about the world casually uttered during communications. The taken-for-granted knowledge gives us a glimpse of the wider social and political meanings.

Though CDA is not exclusively qualitative, it takes typically the form of the microscopic analysis of excerpts of data, which is then connected to the wider social contexts in which the data set is situated. This will become clearer in the following chapters when I look at short excerpts to build a picture of wider dynamics. In doing so, I sometimes also compared the content of my data excerpts to talks, documents and comments made in other contexts. I used these comparisons to enrich my understanding of a specific category. I paid attention to instances of implicit values and taken-for-granted knowledge about contemporary society and seek to understand the implied classificatory systems that are used to organise knowledge and social hierarchies. I also paid attention to any references to the use of rational thinking and "unresolved" ambiguities and contradictions.

The data chapters are based on themes that have developed over a continuous process of coding, re-coding and merging of codes (see Chapter 4 for a detailed description of this process). Thematic analysis was only one method that was used to code the data. During my initial analysis, I also coded any references

to authors that I found in the lesson recordings, which I list in Chapter 4. In the analysis, I also looked at the style of the narrative. I paid attention to the switching of tenses (from past to present tense and vice versa) in the narratives, and the use of formulaic language in speech I defined as "normative" (commands, exhortations). I also noted down where the advice effectively came from, for example, whether a piece of advice (e.g. "lesson from the *sīra"*) originated directly from descriptions of the Prophet's qualities or behaviour, or from other characters (i.e. companions of the Prophet), religious verdicts, or general culture.

In my analysis, I paid particular attention to how instructors described sources of information in the classroom, for example, if they were deemed indisputable, questionable, "Islamic", authentic, foreign etc. and what weight was given to them in the class. I identified three types of references made: Qurʾan (whether it was in Arabic or a translation and whether reference to a specific chapter and verse was provided), references to other texts (books or articles, modern or premodern) and generic mentions of scholars (where the author is mentioned without reference to a particular text). Qurʾanic verses and mentions of scholars were the most utilised during the classes. Both instructors encouraged students to read *sīra* books in general and carry out independent research, but rarely referred to specific passages in books (with exact references). Both prophetic biography courses relied exclusively on oral narratives, namely the audio lectures of Instructor A and video lessons of Instructor B. Neither course provided a reading list or textbook, and no other written resources or visual and audio materials were used to support learning. This highlights perhaps a continuity with some forms of Islamic education, which were traditionally characterised by orality, the embodiment of texts and the centrality of the scholar (Sabki & Hardaker, 2013). The two class settings described above sit in contrast with the classes I have attended at Institute C, where lectures centred around assigned readings, visual presentations on a whiteboard that were used to outline key points, lists or quotes from the readings (that the

students had to read in advance). I analyse these sources of information in detail in Chapter 4.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the wider relevance of this comparative case study within the contexts in which it is situated (cyber-Islamic environments, traditionalism, Sunni Islam, religion online) and I have explained how I aim to expand on the concepts of civic engagement by using grounded theory methodology and critical discourse analysis. I also outlined the three research questions and described some general features of the selected case studies (Institute A and B) and how I gained access to the field. I discussed some practical and ethical problems associated with conducting research online and provided an outline of the research plan and methods that were used to analyse the dataset. In Chapter 4, I provide a descriptive analysis of the themes produced during the first stage of data collection and analysis.

PART TWO: THEMES, SOURCES AND STRATEGIES

Chapter 4: Themes, Appellations, and Sources

The aim of this research is to explore the interpretative practices employed by the instructors to elaborate ideas of civic and political activism as they emerge from the lectures. The first phase of data analysis involved identifying themes in a way that was broadly inspired by grounded theory methodology. This is a descriptive analysis where I explore and compare the categories generated from the two classes (Chapters 4 and 5). The second phase was a focused analysis inspired by CDA. This phase allowed me to explore selections of the data relevant to the research questions and expanded the categories theoretically with particular attention to the wider sociopolitical contexts and debates in which the lessons are situated (Chapters 6-9).

From the entire data set, the initial coding process resulted in three hundred codes that were either directly or indirectly relevant to civic and political engagement (or better, they had the potential to explain how the instructors defined and theorised it). After this, I started refining and merging the codes. A key part of this process involved finding similarities between codes (e.g. “the role of education” and the “function of scholars” were similar enough to be grouped together). This process resulted in all codes being grouped into seven main *clusters*. Later, I identified several clusters that were connected to each other in the instructors’ lectures. I merged these clusters to form three *themes*. A visual representation of this process is presented in Table 4.1. In the first part of this chapter, I explain this process of merging and finding connections, provide an overview of the themes and offer some examples of connections between clusters. In the second part, I look at appellations (i.e. how the instructors addressed their audiences) and textual sources (i.e. what material the instructors quoted in their lectures).

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TABLE 4.1 VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DATA.

Top line: Analysis resulted in three hundred broad *codes* related to the research questions (labelled “c”). **Middle line:** similar codes were grouped into seven *clusters*. **Bottom line:** Clusters that were found to be connected to each other were grouped into three central *themes*.

4.1 The themes

Table 4.2 lists the seven clusters that emerged across the data set (from a total of forty lectures across the two institutes). The table also gives the number of total instances of codes for each cluster to give an indication of their frequency. These numbers should not be taken at face value; first, because the way they have been labelled depends on my interpretation of the data, and second, because there is a considerable amount of overlap between clusters (which is the reason why I merged them again into three themes later in the process). The numbers in the table, however, give an idea of how frequently some topics were mentioned in the lectures and therefore the kind of ideas that preoccupied instructors A and B the most. It is also worth noting that the clusters that are intuitively more pertinent to the research questions of this study were among the most frequent (clusters 1, 2 and 4).

Clusters	Instances of codes	Number of Sources
1- Interpretative processes, the role of education and scholarship	566	40/40
2- Institutions, leadership and the polity	557	36/40
3- Faith, belief and worship	381	35/40
4- Civic and political engagement	332	32/40
5- Liberties, rights and responsibilities	210	28/40
6- Community and inter-faith relations	205	32/40
7- Law and norms	152	32/40

TABLE 4.2 CLUSTERS IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY

In order to describe these seven clusters, I quickly realised the need to merge them once again, because I found there were important (and sometimes not so intuitive) connections between them, e.g. cluster 2 (institutions, leadership) was merged with cluster 7 (norms and laws) to form a central theme. I did this to show connections between clusters and to explain how the codes answered the research questions.

The three central themes resulting from this process of drawing relationships between clusters are shown in Table 4.3.

Themes	Merged clusters
Theme 1. Interpretative processes, the role of education and scholarship	Cluster 1
Theme 2. Civic and political engagement	Cluster 4 (major), cluster 3 (major) Cluster 5 (minor), cluster 6 (minor)
Theme 3. Leadership, the state, laws and norms	Cluster 2, cluster 7

TABLE 4.3. THE THREE CENTRAL THEMES AND THE RELATED CLUSTERS

Cluster 1 includes all codes related to interpretative practices, the role of education and scholarship. There was enough data in cluster 1 to become central "Theme 1", so this cluster was not merged further. Theme 2 includes all the codes related to civic engagement. It consists of cluster 4 ("civic and political engagement") and cluster 3 ("faith, belief and worship"). These two clusters were so interwoven in the data because the concept of "activism" and "worship" were not usually employed in the lectures as separate ideas. Theme 2 includes also some elements from cluster 5, "liberties, rights and responsibilities", and cluster 6, "community and inter-faith relations". Theme 3 resulted from the merging of cluster 2, ("institutions, leadership and the polity") and cluster 7 ("law and norms"), as discussions about leadership often led to topics about law-making and vice versa.

Listed in Table 4.4 are additional clusters that I put aside during the research process because they did not provide direct answers to the research questions. These clusters, however, will make their way into the analysis when they overlap with the three themes just described.

Marginal clusters	Instances of codes	Number of Sources
8. War and violence	394	32
9. Body, character and emotions	374	33
10. Economic processes	130	22
11. Identity and belonging	84	23
12. Aesthetics	40	23

TABLE 4.4 MARGINAL CLUSTERS THAT HAVE MADE THEIR WAY INTO THE ANALYSIS THROUGH THE PRIMARY CLUSTERS IN TABLE 4.3

To provide a few examples, cluster 10 ("economic processes") was at times connected to the idea of citizenship through cluster 5 ("liberties, rights, and responsibilities"). This happened, for example, when Instructor A discussed fighting economic inequalities and standing up for the rights of the oppressed and the poor. The instructor, however, never explored the topic in more than a brief mention, so the theme was not included among the main clusters. However, the fact that there was a passing mention is acknowledged and included in the analysis whenever relevant.

Cluster 8 ("war and violence") is a recurrent topic because in the first phase of the *sīra* (called the Meccan phase) new Muslims are persecuted by the Meccan ruling elite and in the second phase (Medinan phase) battles take place between the new Muslims who emigrated to the city of Medina and the ruling elites from the Meccan tribes. The instructors, especially instructor A, gave very detailed chronicles of the battles, but the codes that resulted were not included in the analysis because they were not often used to extrapolate pieces of advice (lessons) to inform contemporary practice. The fact that these narratives were *not* used is key to understand the instructors' approach to civic and political engagement. I discuss this in more depth in Chapter 5.

Regarding cluster 11, even though "identity and belonging" in the academic literature often feature as important aspects of citizenship, these concepts did not feature prominently in the lectures, so they remained marginal in the analysis. They are occasionally mentioned when I discuss the dimensions of civic engagement in Chapter 8. On the other hand, cluster 12 ("aesthetics") although not mentioned frequently, features in discussions about citizenship, civic engagement and leadership, especially at Institute A, where "beauty" is treated as a key indicator of good character for Muslim leaders and activists.

4.2 Descriptive analysis: overview of the themes

Theme 1. Interpretative practices, the role of education and scholarship

Theme 1 ("Interpretative practices, the role of education and scholarship") identifies with cluster 1 and is the largest category in terms of frequency of references. It also featured in prominent places in the lectures, such as the introductions to the courses. This cluster covers a large number of issues that are considered foundational, that is, they set the "rules" that are necessary to understand how and why Muslims should study the prophetic biography, and indeed, how and why Muslims should study Islam more in general. During the lessons, there are several interesting interpretative and methodological discussions that really give an insight into the instructors' concerns about the contemporary study of Islam, how it is influenced by orientalist narratives, anti-Islamic discourse, "extremist" and "deviant" views, secularism, scientific thought and Western academia.

During the lectures, the role of education in society is at times discussed in political terms. Instructor B was most concerned about this and saw education as the foundation of society. Education was discussed in terms of upholding tradition against modern intellectual trends and emphasising the importance of

learning with traditional scholars. The latter was an important concern for Instructor A. For both instructors, the Islamic methodology of studying history and other Islamic topics was a "scientific endeavour" on a par with modern scientific or other academic research, as I will show in Chapter 6.

The narrations of the Prophet's life are frequently interposed by methodological reflections, for example, discussions regarding the principles of interpretation that, in the instructors' opinions, should inform how the Prophet's example should be modelled by their students. References to these principles are scattered across the lectures and were sometimes prompted by students who wanted more clarity about how certain aspects of the Prophet's life might be transferred to contemporary situations, if at all.

Theme 2. Faith, public worship and activism

To create Theme 2, I merged four clusters: "civic and political engagement" (cluster 4), "faith, belief and worship" (cluster 3), "liberties, rights and responsibilities" (cluster 5) and "community and inter-faith relations" (cluster 6). I found two of these clusters ("faith and worship" and "civic and political engagement") to be conceptually inseparable from one another. This is because the instructors described *daʿwa* (proselytization, education about Islam) and *ʿibāda* (rituals, worship) in distinctive civic and political terms. In fact, one of the most noticeable features of both courses at Institute A and B was the *near equivalence of "acts of worship" and "civic and political engagement".* In the lectures, worship was effectively treated as a form of civic engagement and vice versa, since civic and political engagement needed to have a religious basis. I describe this equivalence in more detail in Chapter 7 and the implications of defining civic engagement in terms of religious education and worship in Chapter 8.

The instructors, especially instructor A, also highlighted that Islam is multi-dimensional, it cuts across private and public spaces and addresses rational-

intellectual as well as emotional and spiritual dimensions of life. At times, the instructors interpreted Islamic narratives to make subtle political statements. For example, the existence of a multiplicity of Prophets, the portrayal of Muhammad as the primordial Prophet and Islam as a universal religion raised issues of multiculturalism, civil rights and tolerance.

In the data set, there were also several codes related more specifically to civic and political engagement such as the permissibility of contesting or challenging authority, the appropriateness of different forms of political engagement (lobbying, demonstrations, petitions, alliances with others civil society groups) and the role that Muslims should play in secular. As for the previous Theme 1 (i.e. cluster 1), the comparative analysis of the data from Institutes A and B brings to the surface interesting differences and similarities between the two.

On one hand, Instructor A focused on the individual (personal development) without denying the social and political significance of public displays of religiosity and efforts to support social justice causes. The position of Instructor B was also ambivalent. He was outspoken in addressing the failures of both militant and missionary Islamic movements, for either lacking necessary knowledge (in the case of the former) or failing to progress (in the case of the latter) in the effort to create a Muslim society. He charismatically outlined a step-by-step *methodology of the Prophets*, that is, essentially a *theory of social change* inspired by the life stages of *all* Prophets which Islamic movements should follow. There are also other clusters within this theme: cluster 5 ("liberties, rights and responsibilities") overlaps considerably with the cluster 4 ("Civic and political engagement"). At institute A, several references were made to the egalitarianism embodied by the Prophet and a Muslim's duty to adhere to social hierarchies ("circles of responsibility") and upholding people's rights.

Theme 3. Leadership, the state, laws and norms

Theme 3 in the data set consisted of codes related to institutions, leadership and government. Examples of prominent codes in this set include strengthening the Muslim community and creating a Muslim society that guides Muslims towards piety. Another cluster within this theme relates to the distinction between law and norms and whether laws should change with the passage of time.

Recurrent topics within Theme 3 relate to the Prophet's qualities as a leader, and to constitutions, treaties and negotiations credited to the Prophet, all of which overlap with the issue of good leadership significantly. The quality of leadership became relevant to contemporary Muslims in discussions about making sound strategic political decisions, obeying Allah's commands, consulting the community, keeping the social order and being compassionate, yet firm whenever necessary. The instructors also mentioned exceptions, or limits, to the consultative process. Among other issues included in this theme is the importance of establishing a leadership position that would unify Muslims. This theme is analysed in detail in Chapter 9.

4.3 Parallel qualifications and ideal audiences

Apart from the live classes, in the recorded classes the instructors did not appear to know who was listening to their classes behind the screen. The discussion forum of the prophetic biography at Institute A was quiet, with only two or three students asking or replying to questions on a regular basis. Instructor A once told me during an interview that he did not particularly mind the anonymity and lack of student engagement because at times it happened that students would contact him via email to ask questions about the lectures, sometimes a long time after they had completed the course. This was evidence for him that the classes had some impact, even if the impact was not

immediately measurable or evident to him. At Institute A, in the forum section of the class there was a record of participants and a list of active students ("active" meaning who had accessed the course in the last two weeks). Around midway through the course there were 16 active students: five students were reported to be residing in the UK, five in United States, two in Australia, one in Sri Lanka, one in Jordan, one in France and one in Pakistan. The same information was not available at Institute B.

From the outset, it was clear that the "target student" for Institutes A and B was different. Both institutes provide a pathway from a more basic to a more advanced level of study. Institute A, however, offered basic lecture series presented as "courses" free of charge and extremely easy to access. Institute A aims to attract a public of Muslims who want to nurture a personal connection with the religion and grow spiritually. Perhaps for this reason, the institute did not include examinations (although some courses included quizzes to aid self-study), nor did it provide official certificates or formal or informal qualifications as evidence of having attended or successfully completed a particular course.

At Institute B, students could register for individual modules, yet the whole programme was presented as a package which was very similar to a university degree. The *alimiyyah* qualification at the end of the five-year programme cannot be called a degree because this private online institute is not a degree-awarding body (which means its qualifications are not recognised by the government) nor affiliated to a degree awarding body. In the UK, there are Islamic institutes that offer accredited Islamic Studies degrees such as Muslim College, Cambridge Muslim College (validated by the Open University), the Islamic College (validated by Middlesex University) and al-Mahdi institute (validated by the university of Birmingham). The goal at Institute B seems to be to develop students into scholars (*ʿulamaʾ*) who can then work in the communities and contribute to broader society with their knowledge. Instructor B in the classes encouraged students to build their own educational institutions. I know of one case in which this happened. It seems therefore that the value

and the output of the qualification does not derive from being associated with a mainstream academic institution, nor is there an expectation that successful completion of the programme should result in a conventional job. Rather, civic engagement is the natural progression of a student who successfully completes the entire programme. The worth of this legally unrecognised qualification operates on at a parallel level compared to formal qualifications from mainstream institutions, providing graduates with the status and reputation to speak publicly about Islam and be consultants or leaders within their own communities. The reputation of mainstream universities is *institutional* in nature. This means that the institution acquires or maintains its reputation based on its history, brand and research and teaching accomplishment that are calculated according to nationwide measures. The reputation of this Islamic institute appears instead to be *personal*. This means that the reputation of the institute, the programme (and resultant qualification) is associated entirely with the reputation of the individual scholars, the Islamic scholar who runs the institution and who personally authorises the qualification. The Islamic educational institution is therefore foundational and entirely dependent on the authority of this individual scholar (Instructor B).

To understand who these Islamic e-learning courses were meant to be for, I paid attention to who the instructors were addressing in their lectures. To achieve this, I analysed passages where the instructors addressed their audience. Instructor A, during his recorded classes, addressed four ideal types of Muslims, as illustrated in the following passage:

> The *dāʿī* (one who calls to Islam) is never stagnant, he or she is … never resting in the path of Allah to call people in the way of Allah, to teach, to benefit the Muslim community and he or she is always trying to reach … people in innovative ways. The Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* knew that it wasn't probable that, (the people of Taif) would protect a Qurayshi, … so if one way seems blocked… the *dāʿī* or the Muslim activist or the leader or the scholar or the student of knowledge needs to turn to another path … and so the lesson here is to never give up, never, never give up, even when it seems like things are getting impossible. (Institute A – The Prophet's Appeal to Taif)

This passage refers to the Prophet's journey to a city called Taif in a desperate attempt to form alliances and call for help from the oppressive ruling elites of Mecca. It shifts from the third person to a command in the second person. In the third person, four "types" of Muslims are named: the student, the *dāʿī* *(*caller*)*, the activist and the community leader.

The words "student", "caller", "activist" and "leader" follow a trajectory according to their educational level: from the student who learns, the caller who passes on their knowledge to others, then the activist who employs that knowledge to change society and, finally, leaders who have acquired the authority, trust and experience to direct and speak on behalf of the community. The instructor in the passage above does three things: (i) summons these four types, (ii) provides the lesson from the *sīra* (e.g. the Prophet did not give up on his mission against all odds) and then (iii) addresses his own audience directly in the form of a command.

At Institute A, these four designations are recurrent throughout the prophetic biography course and linked, as seen in the example above, to specific events in the Prophet's life. In some cases, lessons are extracted from descriptions of the Prophet's companions and addressed to a first-person plural ("we as Muslims"), perhaps denoting a common sense of belonging or a shared mission:

> … (The companions) used to go back and forth to bring food and water and other supplies (so) we realise that we as Muslims need to be active within our own communities, right, for the cause of the *dīn* and not just confined and dormant. (Institute A – The Hijra (emigration to Medina).

During the interview with Instructor A, when I mentioned that I felt his classes encouraged activism, he disagreed with my suggestion and corrected me in two ways: first, he argued, it was never his intention to call people towards activism, but rather he took it as a default position that Muslims are involved in the everyday life of their communities. All along, he explained, he was referring to

inevitable forms of engagement in the community, like parents, for example, who chat to fellow parents outside their children's school gates. For the instructor, participation meant whatever is expected from a member of a particular society, a position that accommodates different understandings of civic engagement. He clarified that he would never support any particular social or political cause. Second, when further prompted, he added that the political situation had changed since he had recorded the course and that now he would be more cautious about promoting activism, which explains the disparity between the content of the lectures recorded in the past and the instructor's changing opinions based on present reality.

This response gives an insight into the feeling of responsibility, the challenges and the vulnerability of Muslim educators and preachers who make statements about Islam in the public domain, which became clear also when I read the questions that were asked by the students during the course. The instructor's explanation of his own lectures, as he was almost retracting or redacting their meaning during the interview, shows that there is a discrepancy between the ideal proposed in the lectures and the messy reality of living Islam in an ever-changing, politically complex world. It is important to remember here that my fieldwork took place in 2016 when the actions of ISIS/Daesh in the Syrian civil war were intensely scrutinised in the media, especially concerning human rights abuses.

The question I asked the instructor about the types of activism promoted in the classes was unintentionally politically charged. With his response, the instructor intended to normalise Muslims in a world where the faith-based political engagement of Muslims is often loaded with negative connotations and almost automatically termed "political Islam", Islamism, extremism, etc. His response effectively attempted to make the civic experiences of Muslims a part of the ordinary fabric of society by explaining that he expects his students to be engaged with the community as all ordinary people are. The instructor's correction of my interpretation of the lectures happened despite the words I

found in the classroom indicated a willingness to encourage students to be students, callers, activists and leaders.
The instructor at Institute B was interacting with students in a physical classroom environment, while his online students watched either the livestream or the recorded video lessons. For this reason, the instructor often addressed exclusively the students in the physical classroom. For Instructor B, education is strategic to building a Muslim/Islamic society. In his reasoning, there is a movement from Islamic education (the process of becoming conscious of religion through education) to civic and political engagement (the process of acting upon this religious consciousness in society) and nation-building (the Muslim community being in a position of leadership, able to determine its own affairs). Perhaps for this reason, the instructor recommended his students to be involved in the community, for example, by setting up educational initiatives.

4.4 Literary sources and orality

In the online classes, the few texts that were quoted were often reported without citing the sources. During the transcription process, at times I had to stop the recording to note down some extracts that were read out loud, sometimes in Arabic without a translation, to look for the source. This happened most frequently with Qurʾanic verses and *ḥadīth* literature. It was also common to mention a scholar's opinion without referring to the text where the opinion could be found. The prophetic reports (*aḥadīth*), in the majority of cases, would be narrated in their truncated form, i.e. as direct quotes "The Prophet said", without the chain of narrators preceding them, which is common practice in the earliest books of the prophetic biography (Schoeler, 2010), and without making reference to the original books were these could be found.
The absence of a core syllabus – that is a list of topics with assigned readings for each week and some notes on expectations and aims of the course – made

the whole learning experience very different to a mainstream university course. The entire experience at both institutes emphasised orality, and the course material consisted entirely of the voices of the instructors. There were no other components of learning, like readings or visual presentations, to aid learning. In contrast, the lectures at Institute C (the secular academic institute) were entirely based on the assigned readings, references to which were made at length in the presentations and discussions. The objective of the readings was two-fold: to provide an overview of the primary and secondary sources and to encourage students to assess different intellectual trends and methodological approaches to the historical evidence available. Due perhaps to my educational background, I construed the reliance on orality as a limitation at both Institutes A and B. Historically, traditional Islamic education was characterised by informal and interpersonal bonds between teachers and their students, student-paced learning, peer-learning and memorisation supplemented by extensive commentaries of the texts (Berkey, 2007). In such a physical context, orality may work well. However, in e-learning environments, these traditional pedagogical strategies can be significantly more challenging, especially if the students are studying alone supported only by limited computer-mediated social interaction. More research is necessary in order to understand how other Islamic institutes operate, how frequently written materials are included in the online classes at these or other institutes, and how orality is to be measured, for example, if the learning experience differs when an audio or video recording is accompanied by a book chapter or by teachers' notes. The provision of written documents fixes meanings to a higher extent than the spoken words. Even when the words are recorded, they are nevertheless more ephemeral than the written form.

At institute A, I noted sixty-seven mentions of scholars' names throughout the twenty-eight hours of narrative, an average of just a little more than two references per hour of recording. These mentions were often not followed by a full quote or a book reference. At Institute A, each recorded lecture included

detailed narrations of the settings and conversations between the characters of the story (the Prophet, his family members, and companions) as well as moral and practical lessons that the instructor diligently extrapolated from the narrated events. At institute B, I noted thirty-one references (outside the introductory class) in eight hours of lectures. The lectures discussed how scholars interpreted reports about specific events. Instructor B sometimes offered his own reading of the reports (e.g. his assessment of the reliability of the narrators or internal logic of the story) with the purpose of deducing "what must have really happened". Often, his conclusions contradicted the common interpretation of these events.

In short, when listening to the lectures, it was not always clear where the information about the prophetic biography was coming from, and references were never given in a written format. When names of authors or (more rarely) passages from books were mentioned in the lectures, these sources were often not presented alongside some historical context. On one occasion, as I was transcribing a passage from the lectures, I realised that the argument instructor A was making had been paraphrased from a book by al-Buti's without attributing the argument to the original source (even though the instructor had mentioned al-Buti on a few occasions elsewhere). Table 4.5 (at the end of this section) lists the scholars that were mentioned during the classes and the number of mentions for each scholar throughout the lessons at each institute. The entries are organized in chronological order by the approximate year of birth of each scholar. Listing the scholars was a useful exercise to understand the breadth of scholarship that was being cited and how much overlap there was between Institutes A and B.

The scholars that Muslims choose to quote, who can be either past or contemporary, play a part in defining their Islamic orientation and are indicative of their openness to different theories and approaches and perhaps even their worldview. Who we choose to cite in our work (and importantly who we omit, intentionally or unintentionally) has become an issue of contention in academia

in an effort to highlight the systemic silencing of certain voices (e.g. women, ethnic and cultural minorities, Majority World scholars) and the monopolisation of knowledge by other voices (white European men). Notably, Sara Ahmed (2017) has suggested that citations are like "bricks": "they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings"; they "affect the kind of house we build" (p. 16). The focus on citation politics is part of a broader effort by academics to address pervasive forms of institutional racism, gender inequality and the neo-colonialism (Mott & Cockayne, 2017; Peters, 2015). As a result, there is increasing awareness of the implicit biases that are reproduced through the ways the curriculum is organised and the readings that are assigned, for example, why some subjects or works are considered "core" while others "peripheral".

Increasingly, academics and public intellectuals are questioning the authority of Western literary works. Why are they labelled *essential* or *universally relevant*? Why is it assumed that everyone *must* know the "renowned names", while "other" authors who speak from non-Western perspectives are merely considered *optional,* relegated to a *particular geographic or anthropological study area*? These debates famously raised the question put forward by Dabashi (2015): "can non-Europeans think"? That is, why are non-European works not considered as valuable as (neo)-European counterparts are? In practical terms, this means ensuring that no part of the European classics is left unquestioned. It is a project focused on identifying the implicit assumptions found in these works and how they may be reproducing certain social and epistemic hierarchies and relations of dominance and subordination. Are the classics thoroughly read in a way that brings to the surface unequal power dynamics? The body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge challenge the implicit classifications that presume European thought is exclusively positioned to transcend time and space. The project of decolonising knowledge means diversifying the curriculum by engaging meaningfully with knowledge(s),

traditions and philosophies of the natural and social world from outside the (neo)-European hegemonic complex (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Given the political significance of the texts we choose, in my research I also looked at the role of citations in the online classes. For example, I asked how premodern scholars were portrayed and critiqued, how their ideas were presented and whether context was considered when quoting scholars whose life was immersed in extremely different material, cultural and sociopolitical conditions.

Scholars' names are often utilised to justify arguments and reinforce a particular worldview, that is, to "build the foundations of a dwelling" and establish the norms that should regulate a community or a society. Citation politics is key, for example, in the arguments put forward by feminist scholars of Islam such as Fatima Mernissi (1987) and Amina Wadud (1999), among others, who argued that patriarchal orthodox positions within Islam predominate because the interpretations of texts have been historically (and still are) monopolised by men.

It might therefore come as no surprise that all but one author mentioned during the *sīra* courses were men. Only one woman, Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer, was mentioned at Institute A as a peripheral example in a discussion on modern day slavery. This reference was in a YouTube video from Institute A (not the prophetic biography course). This does not mean that the instructors were intentionally excluding women, but that they are embedded in a culture where the inclusion of women requires either a conscious effort or significant cultural change. For example, there may be a lack of awareness of source materials authored by women (which includes not considering the inclusion of women's voices important in all disciplines), a shortage of qualified women scholars within their networks and/or lack of openness towards non-orthodox views, such as the feminist Islamic scholarship mentioned above. Canonical works written by men are at the foundation of many Islamic disciplines, unless steps are deliberately taken to include women's voices in each and every class.

From Table 4.5, it is immediately evident that there are scholars represented from every century after the death of Prophet Muhammad (632 AD). The table shows that in the prophetic biography classes, *ḥadīth* literature feature considerably more than *sīra* works, especially from collections that are highly respected within Sunni Islam, such as Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi. The Table also shows a clear focus on the Middle East and a significant presence of scholars from the Indian subcontinent. If one looks at the birthplace of all the scholars up to ca. 1300 AD (I list the modern-day country names to provide an immediate idea of the geographical location), most of the scholars mentioned were from Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions that are now in present-day Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Syria, Iraq and eastern Turkey. Of the early scholars (prior to 1300 AD), only three were from Medina in modern day Saudi Arabia, one from modern-day Egypt, and three from modern-day Spain.
Regarding the authors from the 14th century onwards, there is a clear geographical shift away from Central Asia and the Middle East going simultaneously westward and eastward in terms of provenance. Post 1300 AD, there are only four scholars from Syrian and Palestinian regions, while Egypt becomes central, with eight scholars mentioned in the classes. There are a few mentions of other north-African scholars (from present-day Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Spanish territories in Africa), and then seven scholars are mentioned from the Indian subcontinent (present-day India). In addition to this, there is also a substantial Western presence, with ten authors, a mixture of Muslim converts and non-Muslims, from the UK, USA, Austria, Germany and Canada.

On one side, the composition of the list of authors' birthplaces is anticipated because it broadly follows the historical movement of Muslims from the birthplace of Islam outwards, first towards Persia, and then, with the early Muslim conquests, the Iberian Peninsula, and, with later conquests, taking in the Indian subcontinent. Finally, there is the influence of colonial Europe. On the other hand, however, there are also interesting observations to be made.

First, some of the “classic” scholars that are much celebrated by today’s Muslims (e.g. Bukhari) came from in regions in Central Asia (in the then Abbasid caliphate) that are today religiously (and perhaps politically) marginal to Sunni Muslim discourse, for example Uzbekistan. Second, in regard to the more recent scholarship, religious legitimacy seems to reside in authors from Egypt, Syria and India and also, importantly, anglophone countries (including widely translated “classics”, e.g. Freud, Adorno).

It is also significant that the sources of the prophetic biography do not include modern scholarship outside these geographical areas; it points to a process of Arabization. There is a “visible” absence of non-Arabic (except for Urdu) and non-Middle Eastern scholarship, such as Turkish, Malaysian, and Indonesian speaking authors or scholars from countries outside the Middle East, such as Nigeria or Mauritania to cite two examples. Institute B features more scholars from the Indian subcontinent because of Instructor B’s intellectual heritage, and possibly also because of the significant presence of South Asian Muslims in the UK, where the institute is located.

Another issue worth considering from Table 4.5 is that the instructors did not mention any non-Muslim academic experts on Islam. Non-Muslim scholars received a mention when the instructors discussed Western theories and methods, but only Muslim scholars were mentioned to discuss Islamic issues.

It is also immediately noticeable that the instructors tend to agree on the earliest sources, yet there is less agreement on modern sources. Early scholars from the first six centuries of Islam are represented equally at both institutes (the highlighted entries in Table 4.5). For later scholars, post-1300 AD, there is less overlap, meaning that the instructors mention different scholars and intellectuals except for the traditionalist Deobandi scholar Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi and Syrian scholar Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti (whose “prophetic biography” was mentioned by a student at Institute B in a question about the quality of his work).

In the case of Institute B, the most common prophetic biographies book recommendations were Shibli Numani, Abul A'la Mawdudi and Taha Hussain. Shibli Numani's biography was praised for its academic merit and Mawdudi's and Hussain's biographies for their eloquence, but with some reservations. Taha Hussain, for example, was described by Instructor B as a talented intellectual who, however, deviated from orthodoxy because Egyptian scholars at the time refused to answer his questions and concerns. Instructor B used this example to argue that it is the moral responsibility of the scholars to answer the doubts and arguments of their students, even the most challenging. At Institute A, interpretations from contemporary scholars, such as Syrian scholar al-Buti, permeated the classes, while contemporary intellectuals, such as Amr Khaled, a popular Egyptian preacher (Halim, 2015), also featured. Overall Table 4.5 indicates that, although the educational objectives of the two institutes may have been different at the outset, the way in which the sources were used did not differ substantially. The key difference was that, during the lectures, Instructor B provided a deeper assessment of how different scholars interpreted a particular narration, for example, while Instructor A focused entirely on progressing with the storyline.

In conclusion, this analysis was useful to gain a broader overview of the sources that were used by Instructors A and B in the online classrooms, forums and recordings of the lessons and most importantly how scholarly works and other resources were used. Organising the list of scholars mentioned in the classroom chronologically and geographically also helped understand the wide breadth of influences affecting the instructors' discourses, whether in substance or symbolically. I will return to these observations and make an overall assessment of the use of scholarship in relation to the data analysis in my concluding remarks in Chapter 9.

Name	Period (Circa AD)	Mentions		Modern day nation state
		A	B	
Imam Malik	708-16	1* + 2	1* + 2	KSA
Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri	d. 742	1* + 2	1	KSA
Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal	b. 780	1*	1	Iraq
Al Waqidi (*al-Maghazi*)	b. 748	0	3	KSA
Ibn Saʿd (*Kitab at-Tabaqat al-Kabir*)	b. 784	2	1*	Iraq
Al-Dharimi	b. 797	1*	0	Uzbekistan
Al-Bukhari	b. 810	9 + 2*	10 + 1*	Uzbekistan
Abu Zuʿra ar-Razi	b. 815	0	1*	Iran
Muslim al Hajjaj	b. 815	1* + 7	1*	Iran
Abu Dawud	b. 817	1 + 1*	0	Iran
Ibn Abi Duniyah	b. 823	0	1*	Iraq
Ibn Maja	b. 824	1	0	Iran
Al-Tirmidhi	b. 824	1*+ 5	1*	Uzbekistan
An-Nasaʾi	b. 829	1*	0	Turkmenistan
Ibn Hisham/Ibn Ishaq	d. 833/ b.704	1* + 2	1* + 1	Iraq/ KSA
Al-Tabari	b. 839	1	2*	Iran
Al-Tahawi	b. 853	0	1	Egypt
Abu al-Shaykh al-Isfahani	b. 887	0	1*	Iran
Al-Hakim Nishapuri	b. 933	2	0	Iran
Abu Nuʿaym al-Isfahani	b. 948	0	1*	Iran
Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr	b. 978	1	0	Spain
Abu Bakr Al-Bayhaqi	b. 994	1* + 2	1*	Iran/ Afghanistan/ Turkmenistan
Al-Baghawi	b. 1041	0	1*	Iran/ Afghanistan/ Turkmenistan

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali	b. 1058	3	0	Iran/ Afghanistan/ Turkmenistan
Qadi Iyad ibn Musa	b. 1088	1* (S)	2	Spanish city in northern Africa (Ceuta)
Abul-Qasim ʿAbdur-Rahman Suhayli	b. 1114	0	1*	Spain
Ibn al-Salah	b. 1181	1	0	Iraq
Abu Zakaria Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi	b. 1233	2	1	Syria
Ibn Taymiyya	b. 1263	0	1	Turkey
Ad-Dhahabi	b. 1274	1*	6* + 8	Syria
Taqi al-Din Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Abd al Kafi al-Subki	b. 1284	1	0	Egypt
Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya	b. 1292	1	1* + 2	Syria
Ibn Kathir	b. 1300	1	2* + 1	Syria
Ibn Abi al-ʿIzz	b. 1331	0	2	Syria
Ibn Khaldun	b. 1332	0	1* + 1	Tunisia
Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani	b. 1372	0	1	Egypt
As-Suyuti	b. 1445	1	0	Egypt
al-Qastallani	b. 1448	1	0	Egypt
Muhammad bin Yusuf as-Sanusi	d. 1490	1	0	Algeria
Francis Bacon	b. 1561	1	0	England
Al-Laqani	b. 1631	1	0	Egypt
Shah Waliullah Dehlawi	b. 1703	0	1	India
Ibrahim Al-Bujuri	b. 1783	1	0	Egypt
Karl Marx	b. 1818	0	1	Germany
Sigmund Freud	b. 1856	1	0	Austria
Shibli Nomani	b. 1857	0	3*	India
Hamiduddin Farahi	b. 1963	0	3	India
Sulaiman Nadvi	b. 1884	0	1*	India
Muhammad Husayn Haykal	b. 1888	1	0	Egypt

Taha Hussain	b. 1889	0	1*	Egypt
James Houston Baxter	b. 1894	1	0	Scotland
Theodor W. Adorno	b. 1903	1	0	Germany
Abul A'la Mawdudi	b. 1903	0	1	India
Muhammad Hamidullah	b. 1908	0	1*	India
Martin Lings	b. 1909	2	0	England
Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi	b. 1914	1	2*	India
Mohammed al-Ghazali	b. 1917	0	1*	Egypt
Philip D. Curtin	b. 1922	1	0	USA
John Morris Roberts	b. 1928	1	0	England
Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti	b. 1929	1* + 6	1 (S)	Syria
Saʿid Hawwa	b. 1935	1	0	Syria
Margaret Atwood	b. 1939	1	0	Canada
Shawqi Abu Khalil	b. 1941	1*	0	Palestine
Hamza Yusuf	b. 1960	1	0	USA
Muhammad al-Sallabi	b. 1963	0	1* (S)	Libya
Muhammad Abul Huda al-Yaqoubi	b. 1963	1 (F)	0	Syria
Amr Khaled	b. 1967	1	0	Egypt
Number of scholars mentioned		**42**	**35**	
References not in introductory class		**67**	**34**	
Number of hours		**28**	**8**	

TABLE 4.5 SCHOLARS MENTIONED DURING THE CLASSES AT INSTITUTE A AND B.

Marked with asterisk (*) are those instances in which scholars are only mentioned as sources of the *sīra* in the introduction to the entire course but not cited again in other parts of the same course. (S) means that the scholar was mentioned by a student, not the instructor; (F) means a scholar was mentioned by the instructor in writing in the forum. Highlighted in grey are those scholars who are mentioned by both instructors.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a descriptive analysis of the data set that was collected during the virtual fieldwork experience. I explained how the data was first coded and then how similar codes were merged together to create themes. I also gave a broad overview of the three principal themes that were selected to answer the research questions. The first theme, “Interpretative practices, the role of education and scholarship”, will help answer the first research question (“Which interpretative practices are employed in the formulation and development of political and civic discourse in the observed Islamic online classrooms?”). The second and third theme, “faith, public worship and activism” and “institutions, leadership, norms and laws”, will help answer the second research question (“How are political and civic concepts, in particular the ideas of ‘civic and political engagement’, conveyed in the *sīra* classes observed?”). I seek to answer the third research question (“How do these findings relate to the wider sociopolitical contexts of the classes?”) throughout the analysis by connecting the data to wider trends within Muslim education and new media contexts. In the second part of this chapter, I have described how the instructors addressed their audiences (I explore this more in detail in Chapter 7).

The last section of this chapter looked at the way the instructors made use of sources of information, reading materials and references to scholars and intellectuals throughout the online classes. Here, I made some observations on gender and the chronological and geographical breadth of scholarship across the two courses, which was useful in exploring religious legitimacy and the implicit assumptions governing the narratives of the two instructors.

In Chapter 5, I identify and classify interpretative practices employed in the online lectures.

Chapter 5: Interpretative Strategies and the Prophetic Biography

In this chapter, I will classify some common interpretative strategies that were employed in the online lectures to turn the biography of the Prophet into lessons that the students could apply in the contemporary world. For the instructors, the prophetic biography has (or ought to have) a practical function, either to inform how Muslims should behave or how they should understand Islam vis-à-vis the wider (westernised) contexts in which they live. The different interpretative strategies outlined in this section are used to make sense of the traditions and fulfil this function.

5.1 The function of studying the *sīra:* extracting lessons and addressing controversies

One way to understand the interpretative practices used in the two educational contexts of Institutes A and B is to look at the rationale for studying the subject matter, essentially what the *sīra* is needed for. At the beginning of the course, Instructor A asked his virtual audience the following two rhetorical questions:

> What is the significance of studying the *sīra* for our understanding of Islam? (…) Why we, as Muslims study the prophetic biography and how does it prove our understanding of our *dīn* [religion, way of life]? (Institute A, Introduction)

The wording of this question suggests that the teacher believes the *sīra* can function as *evidence* to *prove* a particular *understanding* of Islam. There is no sense of open-ended exploration here, that is, the biography of the Prophet is meant to *confirm* certain beliefs, rather than for example explore the subject or

critically assess the evidence to develop new insights. The *sīra* serves to strengthen an *existing* conviction, nurture faith and corroborate belief. Instructor A also taught the prophetic biography as a means of drawing closer to Prophet Muhammad as an act of devotion. Overall, Instructor A focused on describing events in detail to prove prophethood as both an intellectual effort and a devotional practice. He explains that studying the biography "solidifies our *yaqeen"* (certainty, true knowledge) in prophethood.

Proving the prophethood of Muhammad has been an important element in inter-faith debates throughout the centuries. An example is the tenth-century debate between theologian Abu Hatim al-Razi and philosopher Abu Bakr al-Razi, who argued over issues that are still relevant today, such as the necessity of prophecy, imitation of the Prophet's model and the role of rational thinking and the empirical sciences (Daneshgar, 2012). This happened in a context of intellectual freedom and pluralism, where scholars were actively engaged in debates of a religious nature with people they disagreed with. During colonial times, debates between Christian missionaries and Muslim scholars also took place (K. Ali, 2014). The fact that Instructor A chooses to define the *sīra* as proof of prophethood reinforces the idea that his audience is immersed in a similar context, characterised by intellectual and religious diversity, thus the need to be equipped with arguments – "proofs of prophethood" – to debate outside the classroom.

Instructor A also focuses primarily on narrating as many events in Prophet Muhammad's life as possible to show how he had achieved more than "any other human being could hope to achieve, more so than merely an intellectual, a genius, a statesman or a military leader". The instructor narrates without delving deeply into the texts, their sources and reliability. His way of narrating is devotional and at times even emotional, everything about Muhammad's life is worth our reverence. At the same time, the instructor defines his own narrative approach as merely relating "historical facts", free from any ideological agenda.

Instructor A also explained that the prophetic biography must be studied because the Prophet is an “excellent example” (quoting Qurʾan 33:21[2]) for “every single *role* that a Muslim can have, there is an example in that” (the life of the Prophet). In addition to fostering spiritual growth and devotion, the *sīra* is also framed in terms of practical, everyday utility. This point is strengthened when Instructor A gives examples of real-life situations:

> There might be a Muslim college student and they are confronted by someone who has read a whole bunch of anti-Islamic propaganda, how do they deal with answering questions? (Institute A)

Instructor A provides an answer to his own question:

> The *sīra* comes handy here, it breathes spirit, *rūḥ*, into our affairs, it gives us inspiration (…) we understand how to behave, we understand as well how to defend the [Prophet] when people criticise him unjustifiably, and we learn how to answer on behalf of the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* and refute misconceptions… and to understand in our own faith how to take out those bumps that come along the road, those whispers of *shayṭān* (devil) that cause us to doubt. The study of the *sīra* removes all those doubts. (Institute A, introduction)

The above passages perfectly encapsulate Instructor A’s approach, which is on one side practical and on the other spiritual. The classes of Instructor A have a spiritual dimension and simultaneously an intellectual-political dimension, that is, the *sīra* course offers responses to external attacks to help curb doubts about Islam that originate in hostile sociopolitical circumstances. If Instructor A’s online lectures were a written text, they could be defined as “polemical” *sīra* works, the type of biographies that developed against the “backdrop of a ‘scientific’ European assault on Muhammad, which reached its peak in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” … These works were “described as defensive, polemical and global in structure and argument” (Khalidi, 2009, pp.

[2] “The Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often.” Qurʾan 33:21 (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

18-19). One example is the “Spirit of Islam” by Syed Amir Ali (1890/1940), where the “Islamic system” is presented as a set of general values, like tolerance and human rights, while elements of early Islamic history that do not align with modern values or can be interpreted in a negative light are instead contextualised to be applicable only in the original context or under specific conditions. To this day, Kecia Ali notes “one consistent key in modern Muslim treatments of Muhammad is the perceived need to combat negative portrayals” (K. Ali, 2014, p. 38).

Also, Instructor B focused on providing answers to controversial issues, however the structure of the course was different. Although the prophetic reports were presented chronologically, the *sīra* was not told as a story, but rather as a host of contentious issues to be clarified. Drawing a definition of “contentiousness” has not been a straightforward process, often because the issues that Instructor B found “contentious” did not always coincide with my own intuitive understanding of contentiousness. For example, on one occasion, Instructor B mentioned, in a short tangential comment, the practice of taking non-Muslim women as slaves in war. This was in reference to the news that Daesh/ISIS were reported to be enslaving women. Instructor B’s criticism of slavery was based on technical and legal issues, not ethical grounds:

> Same thing with *jihad*, these people in Syria and Iraq, they’ve not learned properly, they take Muslim women as slaves, that has never happened, and also for non-Muslim women there are certain conditions. (Institute B)

The focus was on *knowing* the technical conditions that would need to be in place for the enslavement of non-Muslim women to be permissible from an Islamic perspective. Ethics or human rights were absent from the discussion. Also, at Institute B, students never raised ethical objections on this particular or other issues, which might suggest that there is an unspoken, taken for granted, shared understanding of how one should deal with these ethical issues (or what the focus of conversations should be).

At both institutes, neither the instructors nor the students would usually raise ethical questions openly (the few instances in which this happened at Institute A will be described in Chapter 8). These issues were pre-emptively filtered out. In the case of Institute A, the instructor dealt with them – sometimes defensively – by providing ready-made answers to common criticisms about Islam while Instructor B asked students to think logically about the texts and chains of narrators. In both cases, the instructors resolved ethical issues *indirectly*: to different degrees, they either identified technical flaws with the texts or demonstrated that conditions for that issue to be applicable did not exist, thus making the whole issue (at least temporarily) void.

At Institute B, the points of contention that were often discussed in the classroom were primarily "technical"; they involved assessing the reliability of reports, including the internal consistency of the stories. A question that took a lot of the instructor's attention was, for example, "in the period preceding the battle of Badr, did the Muslims leave the city of Medina intending to go to war or intending to raid the caravan of the Quraysh (the tribe that ruled the city from which they had previously emigrated)?" Answering this question took a large portion of one lesson. The instructor sought to explain the motivations the early Muslims, led by the Prophet, may have had for attacking the caravan. He did this by focusing on the language and the internal logic of the reports, i.e. what made more sense based on how the narrations were worded. The ethical issue was bypassed by arguing that it was unrealistic and illogical for the Prophet to mobilise a large army to raid merely one caravan, so the instructor dismissed the traditional reports that claimed that the Prophet would have left for that purpose.

So, in this case, the potential of raising any ethical issue regarding the portrayal of the Prophet as a caravan raider was resolved without at any time involving any *explicit* conversation about the ethics of religious leadership, rather the whole incident was framed in military terms, as a normal strategy that is employed in war to cut supplies to the enemy. The issue of what it means to be

“ambushing and raiding caravans” to disrupt trade routes or supply chains and whether this practice can be considered ethical (even in contexts of war) was not discussed. I will come back to discussing the implications of this in more detail in Chapter 9.

Because Instructor B encouraged *ḥadīth* criticism, exchanges between the students (physically present in the classroom) and the instructor occurred frequently; students freely expressed their disagreement when asking questions to the instructor. Contrary to the lectures at Institute A, which inspired reverence for the Prophet and the scholars, students at Institute B appeared to be more confident and proficient and showed their knowledge of Islam by quoting certain Qurʾanic verses in support of their arguments or questioning the meaning of certain Arabic words or phrases.

Institute A’s approach involved primarily imparting lessons (i.e *fiqh of sīra*). So, for example, in the case of the caravan incident, Instructor A simply justified the raid (and therefore resolved the ethical issue) by claiming that the wealth in the caravan righteously belonged to the Muslims, without providing any textual evidence for this. While the vivid details captured the listener’s imagination, Instructor A’s lectures did not focus on technical aspects of the reports from which the narrative was based on. The entire course was three times as long as Instructor B’s and the aim, as previously mentioned, was to build an emotional connection with the Prophet from his childhood until his death. Students at Institute A were not therefore treated as if they were able to assess narrations. Exchanges between the instructor and students were characterised by an atmosphere of admiration and respect towards the teacher. For example, during the live classes and in the forums, students at times apologised in advance before asking a question that they felt could be potentially considered inappropriate or often made comments that showed they were worried about sounding blasphemous.

One characteristic found in both *sīra* courses was that the Instructors argued their points (in case of Instructor B) or narrated stories (in case of Instructor A)

by constantly moving from the past to the present, from "them then" (the Prophet, his wives, his companions, his enemies) to "us now" (Muslims in the West, community leaders, Islamic groups, Muslim activists and educators, non-Muslims and critics of Islam). Occasionally, examples from other times in history were given too (e.g. colonial times). However, neither instructor provided a comprehensive framework or rationale to explain the methods employed to extract moral and practical lessons from the biography. Overall, as I will show in the next section, different interpretative strategies were employed on an ad hoc basis rather than systematically.

5.2 Interpretative practices

In this section, I categorise the types of interpretative practices that the instructor employed to extract lessons from the biography of the Prophet at both institutes. I occasionally expand these categories by providing examples outside the two case studies. I identify five main strategies: 1) extracting epistemological principles from stories, 2) contextualising the Qurʾan, 3) decontextualising (or transferring context across domains) 4) exceptionalising (reading certain elements of the story as an exception to the norm), 5) assessing on a case-by-case basis and 6) drawing sociological explanations. All these methods are essentially different ways of contextualising events that are found in the life of Muhammad.

For reasons of space, I provide a full summary of the lessons that the instructors systematically extracted from different aspect of the Prophet's life in the Tables at the end of this thesis (Appendix).

Strategy one: extracting universal methodological principles

According to Instructor A, the biography of the Prophet provides lessons for the believers that will help them accept Islamic norms and laws more easily. It is

not a source of law, but a source of wisdom and inspiration. In practice, however, the general rules governing how these lessons should be extracted were not outlined systematically, the closest reference to a general principle was the following excerpt in a video on Institute A's YouTube channel:

… Particularly in today's world … it's become a prerequisite before studying [the Prophet's life] that we study his *shamāʾil* characteristics and qualities, because there are certain events that occurred in the Prophet's *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* life that if we don't know his normative practice and his embodiment of mercy in every situation we might mistake exception for norms and norms for exceptions, so the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* didn't curse people, but there were exceptional circumstances where people did grave harm where he invoked Allah… (Institute A (a public YouTube video))

Given the focus that Instructor A placed on following the model of the Prophet, contextualisation becomes important because it provides some room to deviate from the texts, that is, to make some behaviours *not* worthy of emulation.

The instructor in the YouTube video mentions that it is particularly important in "today's world" to understand the general characteristics of the Prophet versus those "uncharacteristic" incidents that should not be considered customary and therefore normative and applicable today (e.g. cursing enemies or non-Muslims). He seemed to suggest that the way to discern whether a trait of the Prophet should be normative (or not) is to assess its frequency (i.e. whether it happened regularly or whether it occurred in circumstances to be considered extraordinary).

An example of how particular stories can be used to extract broad epistemological principles can be found in the story of the pact of Ḥudaybiyyah. The instructor's lesson is the following:

The opinions of people are subordinate to revelation so there is no such thing as, you know, (…) Allah's word is saying something and we decide amongst ourselves that we are going to take another opinion… because the majority decided we leave what Allah has commanded, this is a lesson of our lives, we always put revelation above our own opinions.
Institute A, The Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah

And this lesson is reinforced on a few occasions[3]. Here is another example:

We can't judge the *dīn*[4] and its rulings. This is very important. Sometimes we look at the *dīn* and we say, 'oh, this is not fair', sometimes people have this doubt, especially when orientalists try to sow seeds of doubts inside people's heart ... 'This ruling' … 'this is not ethical', however our wisdom is too short-sighted, OK, to understand. So that is why Umar *raḍiya -llāhu ʿanhu* (may God be pleased with him) used to tell people, 'Suspect your own opinion, be suspicious when you have an opinion that go against the *dīn'* … the *dīn* of Allah is right whether we understand it or not. (Institute A - In the context of the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah)

These lessons were inspired by the events immediately prior and following the pact of Ḥudaybiyyah, an agreement that was made between the Muslims and their enemy, which was perceived by the Muslims to be to their immediate disadvantage. The Muslims, after this pact was agreed, were demoralised, and Instructor A's comment refers to the objections of a close companion of the Prophet (to become a caliph after his death) regarding this pact. According to the story told by Instructor A, in the end this pact resulted in a period of peace, which enabled the flourishing of the Muslim community and allowed the Muslims to gain supporters and build connections with other tribes freely, therefore resulting in the establishment of Islam in the territory.

The instructor used this story to extract a central and comprehensive epistemological principle: "don't trust your own judgement, simply obey religious commands – *when they are clear* – even if you don't understand the logic behind them or you think they are unethical or unfair". He uses the fact that the companion of the Prophet had perhaps misjudged the potential of this

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[3] The instructor makes similar argument at other points in the *sīra* course, for example:

The Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* doesn't consult people once he's been given a command by Allah. This is really important, the way he said it was very interesting too. Same for us actually, when Allah has a certain command, right, and it is clear to us through the Qurʾan and the *Sunna* and through the words of the *ʿulamaʾ*, then we don't ask for people's opinion and decide whether we should or should not do it, it's the *dīn*, and we should do it. (Institute A, the Prophet in Medina)

[4] *Dīn* is commonly translated as 'religion' – as the obligations/directions given to human beings by God (Gardet, 2006).

pact as a reason to universally declare the subservience of personal opinion (one's judgement and conscience) to divine decree (a decision of the Prophet). With these statements, the instructor suggests that Muslims should not question religious decrees found in the scriptures. He, however, does not specify the commands on which there is universal agreement among scholars, that is, which rules are completely undisputed in their entirety, if we consider the diversity that characterises Islamic scholarship. He does not mention, for example, the fact that the interpretations of some scholars sometimes are believed to "go against the *dīn"* by other scholars. The empirical reality is that many contradictory interpretations, even between and within Islamic schools of law (Sikand, 2005), exist because human attempts to interpret texts (whether the sacred texts or premodern scholarly verdicts that elaborate on the sacred texts) always lead to some variation, including due to different social conditions in which interpretations emerge. Any Muslim, eventually, if interested in obeying "Allah's commands", will need to follow their own "judgment" in order to choose from among many contradictory scholarly opinions, whether on issues of faith or personal, civic or legal matters (do's and don'ts).

In this case, the instructor's reading of the pact of Ḥudaybiyyah was influenced by his own worries about ordinary Muslims defecting from normative Islam, adopting new cultural norms and social values democratically ("the majority decided") or taking matters of interpretation in their own hands (conscience, personal ethics). The instructor removed the story from the specific political context of the *sīra* to extract a universal epistemological principle that seeks to take away the interpretative and rational agency of Muslims. This is a very specific interpretation of this story, and of course, there are a number of alternative principles that could have been extracted instead. For example, the pact of Ḥudaybiyyah could simply be interpreted as teaching Muslims that a careful assessment of long-term and short-term benefits should be undertaken before making important political decisions (the instructor did mention this when

talking about the importance of doing the necessary research whilst strategising, see the Tables in Appendix).

Another interpretation of this pact comes from Instructor B, who suggested that this was proof that Muslims should behave according to their social standing and learn to compromise, instead of demanding justice from the start and at all costs. The incident could be also viewed as an example of how difficult it is to assess rapidly unfolding events when emotions are running high, or that it was the very presence of the receiver of revelation (i.e. the Prophet) that led to the right decision being made (agreeing to the Pact even though on the surface it seemed to go against the Muslims). Emphasising the Prophet's presence leads to a position on "personal opinion" that contradicts that of Instructor A: ordinary people, as esteemed as the closest companions of the Prophet, can only make an effort to form their opinions about Allah's commands and, in the absence of the Prophet, can only facilitate debates on which opinions may be right or wrong, without ever being able to claim absolute answers. This kind of scepticism (i.e. the maxim "be suspicious of your opinions") could then be interpreted as a call for intellectual humility, rather than a way to denounce or tackle critique, defection or disobedience. This may be a reason why, perhaps, Muslim scholarship is often described in the literature has having developed into a variety of schools of law that were decentralised and – particularly in the early times – autonomous from the rulers (Sikand, 2005). It has been suggested that emphasis on "absolute certainties" is perhaps a characteristic of some forms of modern thinking. For example, Walbridge (2010) argues that "contemporary Muslims project a degree of certitude onto their understanding of Islamic law that medieval legal scholars would have found ludicrous" (p. 178). He continues, "there is something about modern societies that leads its people to project the certitudes of their technical manuals and bureaucratic systems onto complex and contradictory histories of their religious traditions" (ibid). Walbridge argues that the Islamic tradition of critical thinking, including within literalist currents, was characterised by more flexibility than it is usually granted

by Muslims today. The nature and the means to obtain the (linguistic or intended) literal meaning of a text, in particular among legal scholars, was in itself widely debated (Gleave, 2012). Here, I have given just a few examples of different principles that can be extracted from one incident, some of which contradict each other. It is likely that we would find more interpretations if we were analysing the original texts and additional contemporary readings of this particular story.

The instructor's plea for Muslims to be suspicious of their own judgement about what is ethical or fair sits in contrast to comments about critical thinking that he made elsewhere in his narration of the *sīra*. In other parts of the course, he defines critical thinking as a way to draw closer to the truth claim of Islam. He resolves this apparent contradiction between obeying blindly and thinking critically when in the *sīra* he discusses the conversion of early Muslims. For example, once he quoted the Qurʾan (2: 170):

> But when it is said to them, 'Follow the message that God has sent down,' they answer, 'We follow the ways of our fathers.' What! Even though their fathers understood nothing and were not guided? Qurʾan (2: 170) (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

Subsequently, he quoted a passage from *Jawharat at-Tawhid of Imam Al-Laqqani* (1631 CE) on the impermissibility of blind following (*taqlid*) on matters of belief, before summarising it in his own words:

> Every single human being is enjoined and required to think about what the truth is, and when the message comes, to consider it, to ask his or herself … whether what they are following is according to the sound tenants of logic and reason. And this is important and this is what the Quraysh didn't want to do. (Institute A, the Quraysh staunchly refuse to accept Islam)

This statement seems to contradict the earlier argument about the necessity to surrender personal opinion to revelation. In this passage, "logic and reason" are given a high standing because reason is instrumental to find the (theological) truth in the first place. The instructor resolves this hurdle by explaining that rational thinking is only needed briefly, in the form of an intuition:

Now once a person has followed Islam according to their own findings and they are convinced of it and … the proofs that one comes to don't have to be very complicated, [they] can be *ijmali* proofs (general proofs)[5]. So normal people … they don't have complicated proofs for why they follow Islam, it is simple: God is one. Why? Because who else could have created all of this creation if they were two gods? They would have disagreed and ruined it. (Institute A, the Quraysh staunchly refuse to believe)

In this passage, the instructor provides an example of an argument that ordinary people can use to show why their belief in God is a rational decision. The "proof" provided is the result of an intuition that coincides with the passage from a state of impurity (idolatry) to a state of purity (Islam).

The "proof" provided also has political connotations because it presupposes conflict between gods instead of cooperation between them. This reasoning can be transferred to human society: a justification for a political system with one leader with decision-making power instead of one where authority is shared through assemblies, forums and parliaments. After this transitional moment of rational freedom, which leads to acceptance of revelation, the next phase is characterised by blind following (*taqlid)* jurisprudential matters:

There is a type of *taqlid* that is permissible and obligatory, that is, when it comes to the law of Islam, right? If a person is not a *mujtahid* scholar [legal scholar qualified to interpret Islamic sources], of which there are none left today and there has not been for many hundreds of years … it is obligatory on that person to follow someone who can see … People call that blind but that's wrong, it's not blind following to follow a *mujtahid* or a scholar of let's say the first few generations. (Institute A, the Quraysh staunchly refuse to believe the Prophet)

This passage indicates that, after the brief moment of critical reflection (that leads to monotheism), one is required to obey and submit to God's revelation. Once this truth is ascertained through reasoning "everything else follows". This involves obeying the texts, or better, the interpretations of these texts that have been accumulated and developed over time. Here again, Instructor A does not

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5 Definition sourced from Macdonald (1903)

account for the steps and layers that make up the interpretative process. "Following a scholar from many hundreds of years ago" involves identifying the material available, selecting and sifting through it, translating it (which is, in itself, a form of interpretation), interpreting their words and understanding the societies that produced them, which were geographically, culturally, economically, politically and linguistically diverse. The process of interpreting the pronouncements and opinions of past scholars leads to different conclusions, yet the instructor claims that it is possible to simply "follow" these scholars from hundreds of years ago.

Instructor B's approach did not involve methodically extracting lessons from every aspect of the *sīra* but discussing a limited number of "controversial" issues about specific incidents. Instructor B's lessons were mostly methodological, his general point being that his students should analyse the accounts that relate the Prophet's life by using logic and identifying inconsistencies within and between accounts. He also outlined, however, two key interpretative principles: the first was the distinction between the *sīra* and the *sunna,* and the second was the division of the *sīra* in three stages that should inform Islamic activism (and, as I will analyse in subsequent chapters, served as a critique of modern Islamic movements).

On one occasion, the instructor at Institute B begun a lesson by drawing a "circle" on a whiteboard. The circle, he explained, represented the *sunna*. The word *"sunna"* acquires different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It may refer to the way of life of the Prophet, to the textual sources that outline this way of life or to those practices of the Prophet that many Muslims believe can be emulated to seek Allah's reward. The instructor then drew a "straight line" in a separate area of the whiteboard and argued that line represented the *sīra*, that is, the unique circumstances that characterise the life of the Prophet. The "straight line" consists of specific circumstances and events that the students should not seek to imitate. This distinction resembles the

explanation given at Institute A to distinguish "exemplary characteristics" of the Prophet from the "exceptions". Instructor B explained:

> *Sunna* is the circle: everyday activities (prayer, giving *salam [greeting]*…) *Sīra* is the lifetime events put on a straight line; it never comes back. When you copy the Prophet, *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam*, you copy the *sīra* or the *sunna*? The *sunna*. It is obligatory on the believers to follow the *sunna*. Why we do *sīra* then? Because you have to know how he applied the *sunna* in his own space." (Institute B)

The instructor provided an example of when these separate concepts were confused: in India during the 1920s, he explained, a group of Muslims protested the decision to replace a mosque with a temple in honour of the Hindu deity Rama. In response to this pronouncement, the local Muslims decided to create an army of 313 combatants who would oppose the construction of the temple. The thinking behind these Muslims, the instructor narrated, was that 313 was a special number, it represented the number of Muslims who – as reported in *sīra* works – won the Battle of Badr (a famous battle where the Muslims defeated a much larger army against all odds). This, according to the instructor, was an example of a ridiculous way to emulate the Prophet. Following the *sīra* instead of the *sunna* cannot bring any positive results, the instructor explained:

> They went there but nothing happened, why? Because they are following the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* in the straight line. You need to follow in the circle. Your 313 people were not like his 313… (Institute B, Methodology of the *sīra)*

When Instructor B says, "your 313 people were not like his 313", he is arguing against a superficial, irrational and/or superstitious attachment to the *sīra*. The instructor argued instead that it is only by learning and imitating the *routine* practices of the Prophet (the *sunna)* that Muslims can build good character traits like those of the early Muslims. The number 313 was therefore simply a meaningless *detail*. For example, the instructor explained that the *sunna* prescribes the permissibility of praying on a camel. If I were determined to copy the *detail* of the act (praying on this specific animal), it would mean that I am

following the *sīra*, while praying on a plane means that I am following the *sunna*. The *sīra* helps to contextualise, that is, clarifying that a camel in this instance was primarily a means of transport. The distinction between *sīra* and *sunna* was therefore made to assess whether a particular behaviour was likely to be a routine practice (of some religious significance) and thus deemed worthy of emulation or a detail unique to the life of the Prophet that should not. The "circle", that is the *sunna,* becomes a form of *education by everyday action*. It involves disciplining the self by repeating daily routines that are meant to mould character and reinforce belief. This character-building process – the instructor believed – leads to long-term success.

A second principle extracted from the *sīra* by Instructor B was a general theory of social change, which I called the "methodology of the Prophets" that represents the instructor's effort to turn the model of the *sīra* into a catalyst for the reformation of Muslims and society. This methodology consists of the three stages of the Prophet's life as it happened in chronological order: the stage of *daʿwa (*education and invitation to Islam*), hijra* (usually translated as emigration, but in this context described as unlearning/doing away with practices that conflict with Islamic norms*)* and finally *jihad (*usually translated as "striving", but here described as a political effort to create a Muslim society informed by Islamic norms). Thus, while Instructor B explains that Muslims "are not commanded to follow the Prophet in the *sīra"*, he also advocates for a methodology/theory of change that corresponds to the main events in the *sīra,* which are unrelated to the Prophet's routine practices (the *sunna*). This principle seems to contradict the distinction between *sīra* and *sunna* highlighted above. What makes these stages different from the *sīra* is that they are not unique to the Prophet. These stages are somewhat cyclical. For Instructor B, they represent the missionary path followed by all Prophets (even if the mission of some Prophets ended at the first or second stage). These stages represent a particular type of "customary", shared prophetic pattern, which according to Instructor B ought to inform contemporary activism. Instructor B was concerned

with identifying which stage Muslims are experiencing right now and how they, as a community, could move from one stage to the next. The key *civic* principle or lesson from the *sīra* was therefore this long-term nation-building plan entirely based on the Prophets' three stages, while imitating the routines of Prophet Muhammad (the *sunna*) in everyday life. The three-stage pattern that characterised the lives of the Prophets therefore develops into a comprehensive theory of social change (i.e. how societies change). The methodology of the Prophets is depicted essentially as a blueprint methodology for civic and political activism.

This theory of social change highlights an apparent contradiction between viewing the *sīra* as a sequence of stages common to all Prophets and a series of specific events unique to Prophet Muhammad. On one side, the cyclicality of the Prophets' missions helps to filter out those unique details of the life of the Prophet that have been needlessly or superficially emulated (e.g. the 313 combatants). On the other, it complicates the whole idea of "linearity" attached to Muhammad's life (the "straight line" drawn by the instructor), by blurring the *sīra* vs. *sunna* distinction, as every stage of the prophetic mission in this theory becomes a model for emulation. It is also unclear how each stage can become a model to be followed if each of those stages is constituted by a collection of unique circumstances.

To recapitulate, the first strategy I have identified in the two *sīra* courses involved extracting general methodological principles or theories from one or more aspects of the Prophet's life. These principles or theories sought to offer some rules or methods to guide the process of interpretation. In reality, however, I have shown that the process of interpreting just one story found in the *sīra* comes with a host of decisions to be made. It entails deciding which details ought to be considered meaningless and which should serve to contextualise, which details should be viewed as "routine" or "exception" (thus, worthy or not of attention), and finally, which details inform a general path taken by all Prophets and which others are unique to Prophet Muhammad. An

interpreter would need to make this kind of decisions on every detail of the *sīra*, if they wished to derive some guidance or wisdom from these stories. Different sets of decisions might lead to different interpretations. Therefore each incident in the *sīra* is susceptible to many (and sometimes contradictory) interpretations. This process is multi-faceted; it requires not only labelling and weighing the details found in each narration but also comparing the lives of different Prophets, and it forms only one part of the study of the *sīra*. For example, in this discussion I have not considered the more traditional concerns with linguistics, the reliability of the narrators and comparing different texts relating the same events. Given the complexity of this process, a common reaction is to ignore the fact that these interpretative decisions are constantly being made in the first place, or perhaps at the other end of the spectrum, to argue that there are too many decisions to keep track of. Therefore, the final interpretation is always subjective, or even arbitrary. I return to this issue in Chapters 6 and 7.

Strategy two: contextualising the Qurʾan

The biography of Muhammad was often used as a resource to explain the context of the Qurʾan. Instructor A once explained that "of the many verses that we have to follow, there are many which have context to them that we would not understand unless we look at the *sīra*". In the majority of cases, the reasons for quoting a verse of the Qurʾan during the *sīra* lessons were to locate the circumstances of revelation of a particular verse, to explain a particular incident in the biography or to describe when a Qurʾanic verse was quoted (rather than revealed) in support of a particular course of action. After locating the moments of revelation in the *sīra* or explaining the *sīra* using Qurʾanic verses, Instructor A would sometimes identify the relevance of the verses in contemporary Muslim life either by transferring to a different context (strategy three) or by exceptionalising (strategy four). In the case of the latter, for example, when the

Qurʾanic verse regarding the permission to strike disobedient wives (Q4:34) is quoted to condemn Islam, some Muslims argue that the verse must be understood in context, for example, that in the *ḥadīth* literature there are no reported incidents of the Prophet using physical violence on any of his wives.

Of around fifty citations of Qurʾanic verses that I identified in the entire course at Institute A, only around ten were directly used to draw general lessons. These lessons varied, for example verse Q59:9[6], which talks about the ties of brotherhood between Muslim emigrants and Muslim natives of Medina becomes a call to welcome refugees and converts to Islam into the Muslim community. Verses Q96:1-7[7], which represents God's command to the Prophet to recite, becomes a call for Muslims to seek knowledge. Verse Q8:1[8], which refers to the distribution of the spoils of war, becomes a lesson on self-restraint, balance and detachment from material things.

These verses were at times quoted in a way that was divorced from the context of revelation. That is, a Qurʾanic verse may be quoted to strengthen an argument being made in a context of the *sīra* that was unrelated to the context in which those verses were revealed. I will provide some examples of this in the following two sections.

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[6] Those who were already firmly established in their homes [in Medina], and firmly rooted in faith, show love for those who migrated to them for refuge and harbour no desire in their hearts for what has been given to them. They give them preference over them- selves, even if they too are poor: those who are saved from their own souls' greed are truly successful.
Qurʾan 59:9 (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

[7] Read! In the name of your Lord who created. He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One. Who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know. But man exceeds all bounds when he thinks he is self-sufficient.
Qurʾan 96:1-7 (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

[8] They ask you [Prophet] about [distributing] the battle gains. Say, 'That is a matter for God and His Messenger, so be mindful of God and make things right between you. Obey God and His Messenger if you are true believers.
Qurʾan 8:1 (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

Strategy three: decontextualizing (or transferring across domains)

In the classes, sometimes there were lessons related to personal development (being patient, fair, eloquent, balanced, presentable, etc.), piety (regularly retreating from society, avoiding temptations) or work (being economically independent, hardworking and innovative), which seemed to be unrelated to activism in the original story, but, in the instructor's interpretation, took on a strong civic message, for example:

> Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā (the most glorified, the highest)* didn't just sort of give him the silver spoon and give him all the wealth, Allah could have done that… rather, he made him work for the sweat of his brow, which is very important for our leaders and activists and students in the Muslim community… that nothing good comes without hard work. (Institute A, Muhammad a shepherd (before prophethood))

The advice provided here is for every Muslim to work hard because the Prophet worked hard as a shepherd before revelation had started. This lesson could have been purely related to personal work ethics, yet it quickly *becomes* civic and political when the instructor addresses his audience as students, activists and community leaders. When the Prophet's jobs prior to revelation are described, for example his qualities as a shepherd (hardworking) or a trader (honest), they are transferred to the context of activism, rather than being transferred to modern contexts of employment or entrepreneurship. At times, it appears that certain attributes that are valued in today's society are identified in the life of the Prophet and subsequently brought back to the present as if they originated in the past.

On other occasions, when he connected lessons to ordinary jobs or professions, it was because being hardworking was considered a characteristic through which Muslims could do *daʿwa* (missionary work). The majority of lessons are associated with a type of *daʿwa* that can be carried out simply by being a good role model. The overall assumption behind this is that Muslims should deploy their religious identity attributes purposefully.

Another common way to transfer across contexts was to “demilitarise” a narrative, that is, to remove any reference to war when a lesson is extrapolated from a military context so that the remaining lessons are of a general character, e.g. being steadfast, being pragmatic or consulting others. The instructor offered a rationale for demilitarising in the following passage:

> Some people think that discussing the wars … makes people more violent and that it encourages militarism … Fighting is not the point itself of why we’re looking at these stories. Rather as you can see, there are so many lessons of character and patience and bravery that we can take in our lives, that doesn’t have to translate into a violent mentality ... or those people who claim that and put Islam down for that reason.
> Institute A, *Mustaliq* campaigns

Here, demilitarising the context of the story serves a twin purpose: the first purpose is to gain practical lessons that could be used in everyday life (most of which are innocuous and generic in nature), and the second purpose is once again to defend Islam from arguments that portray it as violent. Demilitarising serves to make the life of the Prophet conform to contemporary sensibilities, which in this case would question the appropriateness of any “religiously motivated conflict”. Such a type of conflict is likely to be associated with intolerance or even “backwardness”, though modern nations continue to engage in violence for other reasons, which most likely are considered “just” at least by some members of society. Another example of decontextualization by demilitarisation refers to the stories that narrate the Prophet accepting a companion’s advice to build a trench in a major battle (the Battle of the Trench). This example served to show that Muhammad was a leader who consulted others and supported the adoption of “foreign” customs and innovations in different fields. The instructor also hesitated to address contextual issues in a more in-depth fashion. For example, looting in war was not discussed as a historical (or socio-economic) phenomenon nor was there an analysis of how this practice has changed over time, including how Muslims can interpret it

today against the backdrop of modern conflict, the system of nation states and international laws.

Strategy four: exceptionalising (reading certain elements of the story as an exception to the norm)

As I have previously mentioned in Strategy One, on some occasions, the instructors made some incidents of the *sīra* into exceptions. For example, during the narration of the controversial execution of an entire Jewish tribe (*Banu Qurayza*) after the battle of the Trench, the instructor made this incident an exception by arguing that the decision to execute the members of that tribe was based on Jewish laws relating to treason (or otherwise shared rules of high treason) to be understood in their own historical context. In this specific case this event needed to be contextualised, so Instructor A explained that such a ruling would not be applicable under existing international law.
There were other cases where the lesson the instructor derived from the *sīra* directly contradicted a Qurʾanic verse, or better, the instructor interpreted a particular verse as an exception specific to the Prophet, not a rule, and used the *sīra* to support his argument. One such case occurs towards the end of the course, when the following verse is mentioned:

> If anyone disputes this with you now that you have been given this knowledge, say, 'Come, let us gather our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves, and let us pray earnestly and invoke God's rejection on those of us who are lying. (Qurʾan 3: 61 – Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

The instructor explained that this verse referred to an incident in the *sīra* that narrated the occasion when a group of Christians from Najran visited the Prophet. During this visit, the Christians rejected the Prophet's teachings regarding Jesus and so he invited them to a "*mubāhala"*, an activity that the instructor defined as a "mutual cursing session". In this instance, the *mubāhala*

would have involved the family of the Prophet and the Christians invoking the curse of Allah upon each other in public. For example, in an answer to a question about the permissibility of arranging a *mubāhala, Islam Question & Answer* (a popular multi-language *Salafi fatwa* database) suggests that this is an appropriate method to resolve disputations between parties of different religions (2017). Instructor A disagreed and made the opposite argument. In his explanation, he started by narrating in some detail the first encounter between the Christians and the Prophet. As he narrated the story, he talked about tolerance:

> As long as it's not *shirk (sin of idolatry)*, and clear, clear sin, … then the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* tolerated those people, they even prayed in the *masjid [mosque]* … So this is a big sign for us, how we Muslims … when non-Muslims come and engage with us in dialogue, how should we invite them. (Institute A)

Here, the instructor explains that there is a level of respect that should be paid towards people of different religions (without getting into detail about the nature of the debate or *which* religions) even to the point of allowing them to make their prayers in the mosque. The instructor adds, however, "as long as it's not *shirk"*, which can be interpreted in vastly different ways. In fact, the definition of *shirk* is very broad. The Christian practice of praying to Jesus or non-religious gestures such as standing up while an anthem is playing or bowing down to someone in respect have been interpreted by some Muslims as acts of *shirk* (Abou El Fadl, 2001).

Instructor A makes a further point that the Prophet did not tolerate the way the Christians were dressed ostentatiously and refused to talk to them until they changed into more modest attire. In making this argument, the instructor interpreted ostentatiousness as an egalitarian issue:

> How can this person be sincere to Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā* if they are walking around proud and walking around with riches with people who are poor on the other side of the street who need their money? (Institute A)

This sentence serves to delegitimise the monks from an anti-materialistic and/or social justice perspective rather than a religious one. In this way, the instructor momentarily shifts the focus of the discussion from the etiquette of religious dialogue to poverty and social justice. In the narration of the same incident, the instructor also emphasised the role of reason in religious debates, which is juxtaposed to emotion:

> … The Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* engages in intelligent debate, and this is important as Muslims, we don't become emotional, and it's not just about putting the other person down. (Institute A)

And finally, he proceeds to argue that the *mubāhala*, the mutual cursing event that is described in the Qurʾanic verse, is not meant to be understood as a model of interfaith dialogue:

> So, it doesn't mean that today we come together with a group of non-Muslims and we curse them and we ask them to curse as if we're wrong, this is because they [were] in the face of an actual final messenger of Allah *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* and he's telling them, this is the truth, and they're saying 'no, no, no' … This is why this challenge was made. (Institute A, Meeting the Christians of Najran)

The exceptionality of this incident, the instructor explained, is determined by the presence of the Prophet. The instructor additionally makes the point that the Prophet did not curse but rather wished guidance on those who refused to believe in him and that he was a tolerant man and, as a result, Muslims should also be tolerant. Notice here that the instructor is making the "in the presence of an actual Prophet" argument that he could have also made about the "be suspicious of your own opinions" maxim discussed earlier regarding wisdom of the Prophet in accepting the Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah (see Strategy One).

For any of these examples, we could compare how pre-modern scholars interpreted them in the past and/or how contemporary scholars interpret them today. The possibilities are endless. Here, I am only limiting myself to identifying some of these strategies, knowing full well that different people can choose any of these strategies to interpret any incident found in the *sīra*. In this case, the

instructor chose to give preference to meanings of the Qurʾan that call people to "civil" debates, such as the often-quoted verse, "invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction" (Qurʾan 16: 125).

Strategy five: assessing on a case-by-case basis

Another interpretative strategy that I identified in the data is the case-by-case evaluation of the normative potential of specific incidents in the *sīra*. This refers to the idea that contextual conditions should be taken into account before arguing that a specific practice can be applied in any given context. This strategy was often used by the instructors for particularly controversial issues. For example, Instructor A used this strategy when he grappled with the idea of destroying idols as he narrated the moment the Prophet victoriously entered Mecca. For the instructor, the permissibility of destroying idols depends on a calculation of the potential benefits and harms that could follow as a result of implementing such policy. The outcome of this policy therefore depends on assessing the specific historical, cultural and social conditions in each context, so contextualisation in this case becomes essential. Instructor A explained that there cannot be only one blanket policy or rule. Islam adapts pragmatically to evoke different rules, it can be firm or soft, restrictive or tolerant.

One might say this case-by-case strategy reflects the decentralised, adaptable, open-ended nature of Muslim thought that makes scholars wary of giving fixed rulings applicable in all circumstances and at all times. This case-by-case strategy echoes the criticism that I raised in Strategy One, when I discussed the idea of following rules "blindly" against one's "opinion". When useful to the argument being made, the instructor seems to be against absolute rules too. This strategy appears to be especially useful to deal with issues that relate to religious freedom. For example, academic scholar Jonathan Brown made this same argument when he was asked about punishments for blasphemy in Islam

on social media during a live Q&A for faith-based research centre, *Yaqeen Institute*:

> If I were … the head of some Muslim polity or something, I would say this is up to the ruler to decide based on political considerations because that's the principle, that's the Prophet's *sunna* … there's no rule on this, it is based on what dangers does it present, what issues does it present. (Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2017)

A little later, Brown reiterated this concept when a Facebook user asked, "How many laws, especially military and political decisions that the Prophet made, should be continued after his death?" Brown replied that Muslim scholars:

> … default to the idea of saying, it's the decision of the ruler as long is not violating people's rights under the *shariʿa* or what's called their *ḥuqūq al-ʿibād (human rights)* … actually that is human rights, Muslims developed human rights centuries and centuries and centuries before it was articulated in the Western tradition. (Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2017)

While such an approach shows open-endedness and flexibility, the vagueness could also be interpreted as a failure to take a stand on important issues, like blasphemy, that are linked to basic religious freedoms and human rights. Maybe it is because mainstream discourse emphasises the tension between the allegiance to religion and rights-based (secular) citizenship that Brown responds by emphasising the Islamic origins of human rights and how the Islamic legal framework also offers these protections.

Asad (2009) argued that blasphemy has become a matter of "civilizational identity" between the West and Islam. It is perhaps for this reason that online students are particularly preoccupied with a small number of "controversial issues", blasphemy being one of them. The adjective "controversial" here therefore refers to matters that are perceived as characteristic traits of one civilisation or the other. Many debates about Muslims/Islam feature these traits implicitly, often as a set of dichotomies (modern vs. backward, liberal vs. traditionalist, freedom vs. oppression, critical thinking vs. dogma and so on). Partly because Western media and society have focused on these civilisational

stereotypes, it has become common for Muslims, especially public figures, to be under some pressure to make their position known on these issues, for example freedom of speech and religion (blasphemy, idol destruction, apostasy, corporal and capital punishment) and other identity-based rights (LGBTQ+ and women's rights).

As a result, any position on these issues at any one time has the potential to define a person's perceived allegiance (i.e. where one sits) across this imaginary "West vs. Islam" boundary. For some, therefore, debating these issues can take the form of a high-stakes identity test that comes with some risks (e.g. social exclusion, de-platforming, etc.). Public debates surrounding these "controversial" issues might also not always reflect the fluid reality that we live in, which is the product of longstanding historical interactions that have occurred between people and ideas over centuries. People may avoid engaging in critical discussions and simply adopt a position out of principle, to secure one's identity, and attempts to offer a more nuanced analysis may result in accusations of "not belonging" from all sides. In relation to free speech, Asad showed that the West also puts limits on free speech (often for economic reasons – he gave the example of copyright), but it does so in a way that is considered the normal state of affairs. He also sought to show that religion can also be used to challenge the status quo and that certain forms of religious critique can be interpreted as an affirmation of free speech and political resistance.

Often, discussions about these controversial issues serve the purpose of locating one's identity to either "exist" simultaneously in both "cultures" or to be identified as belonging to (or being an ally of) one or the other. Some acquire the convenient position of a sympathetic expert or charismatic mediator between the two "civilisations". In pluralistic contexts, the case-by-case strategy described here (and perhaps other strategies too) could be therefore diplomatic strategies developed as a result of this need to balance different identities, e.g.

to show that one is “Muslim enough” to belong to a certain faith community but “not too Muslim” to avoid being completely shunned by wider society.

Strategy six: drawing sociological explanations

As I have shown previously in strategy one, Instructor B’s lessons offered broad methodological principles and generally seemed less concerned than those of Instructor A with systematically extracting lessons from each episode of the *sīra* (to then transfer these lessons from the original context to different domains of contemporary life – see *Strategy Three*). Instructor B did, on occasions, draw some lessons from certain aspects of the *sīra*, but often the process did not involve transference across contexts or domains. For example, in a narration about the Prophet’s journey to Medina, Instructor B narrated that the Prophet did not take unnecessary risks but sought to have a safe journey. The instructor used this example to explain that Muslims should always take adequate precautions. On another occasion, the instructor highlighted the importance of prayer when the Prophet, on his deathbed, appointed Abu Bakr to lead the congregation in prayer. On occasions, the instructor was explicitly political, for example, once he argued that the Prophet was forced by the circumstances to leave his beloved hometown of Mecca, otherwise he would have stayed. The instructor’s lesson was that Muslims should not think that the Prophet emigrated with the intention to establish his own society. By saying this, instructor B dissuaded Muslims from giving too much importance to the establishment of an Islamic state.

Instructor B, however, did not usually provide lessons in the form of direct exhortations or guidance to his students. Rather, his lessons were discussed in a manner that seemed to offer “sociological explanations”. For example, the instructor narrated that the Prophet built a mosque as soon as he arrived in Medina. Using this example, he explained that the survival of the faith community (and therefore Islam) depends on the existence of places of

worship. This point is significant especially in Muslim minority contexts because it encourages students to build mosques and revive the faith within their communities. The instructor did not make this point, however, as a direct exhortation; it was presented as a sociological explanation or fact (in this case, communities identify with their faith more where there are places of worship). On another occasion, he narrated that the Meccans – who were rejecting the prophethood of Muhammad – nevertheless entrusted him with their wealth. The instructor solved this apparent contradiction by explaining that people give different levels of trust to a person depending on the identity this person claims for themself over time. He used this aspect of the Prophet's life to draw a distinction between political and religious authority. He then corroborated this theory by giving an example of contemporary politics: when Pakistani religious scholars attempt to enter politics, he explained, they fail because they are trusted as religious men, not politicians.

Earlier, I described the various interpretations of the *Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah* and the raiding of the caravan. On these two issues Instructor B also used sociological explanations to make his argument. In the case of the pact, his point was that it is better to achieve social change if people accept their social standing and are a willing to negotiate pragmatically. In the case of the caravan raid, the instructor put forward the idea that certain military strategies, such as cutting the enemy's supplies (i.e raiding the caravan), have remained unchanged across centuries, that is, the Prophet's military campaigns follow the same rules of war that have applied throughout history. It is worth noting here how the instructor uses sociological categories to construct his interpretations and make general statements about how society works today. The general point that the instructor made was often that the dynamics that characterised the political and social life in the Prophet's time are like the processes and forces that are at work today. Whilst remaining wholly committed to his religious mission, the instructor therefore extracted general sociological theories from the textual material about the origins of Islam. He did this to

normalise Islam, that is, to present it as a divine, miraculous phenomenon that is, however, grounded in our empirical reality.

By “sociological explanation”, I do not mean a thorough analysis of sociological data, but the use of the *sīra* to explain ideas from sociology and related disciplines. A sociological analysis entails – momentarily at least – a greater level of open-endedness and uncertainty over religious phenomena, which means questioning at least the origins of, and motivations behind, religious sources and norms. It could mean viewing religious norms entirely or partially as a product of a combination of social, economic and historical factors. For example, Abou el Fadl (2001), conducted a survey of a broad range of scholarly interpretations and debates regarding the prescription of wearing the veil (*hijab*) and proposed that this custom may have been linked to the economic value attributed to textiles, labour relations and class distinctions, essentially a visible tool to demonstrate economic and political power. This sociological analysis questions the often taken-for-granted, universal obligation upon women to cover their hair and body. Instructor B does not engage in this type of sociological analysis. He tends to stay within a normative framework and offers his sociological readings of religious texts instrumentally when sociological categories and ideas help validate his understanding of Islam. He never attempts, for example, to identify other possible economic or social factors behind the religious practices associated to Islam. In Chapter 6, I will return to this issue by analysing in more detail how both instructors question the epistemological principles and methods behind modern empirical sciences, including sociology, while incorporating sociological ideas and terminologies in their arguments.

5.3 Final observations: the absence of a systematic methodology

In the previous section, I have provided some examples of how the two instructors interpreted the biography of the Prophet. I have identified six methods used by the instructors to extrapolate principles and lessons from the *sīra*.

In my analysis, I highlighted that Instructors A and B both provided some general principles to help students discern which practices and behaviours attributed to the Prophet must or must not be imitated. Instructor A alluded to the distinction between general characteristics of the Prophet and exceptional behaviours. Instructor B explained the idea of customary behaviour (circle, *Sunna*) in opposition to the incidents unique to the Prophet's life (the straight line, *sīra*). In practice, however, I have shown that these principles are applied unsystematically and inconsistently. Some incidents in the *sīra* are given unusually high importance (e.g. the caravan) and are turned into all-encompassing, universal principles (e.g. "don't trust your own conscience or logic"). Some behaviours found in the *sīra* that provide some inspiration are removed from their historical context and turned into generic advice (e.g. being steadfast), while others are transferred from one realm of life to another, for example working hard as a shepherd becomes a lesson about activism or a military strategy becomes an exhortation to be innovative. Some examples of transference across contexts (Strategy Three) are used to respond to contemporary circumstances (e.g. don't be "extreme", don't focus on establishing an "Islamic state"). There are also some "controversial" incidents that are made into exceptions (e.g. cursing others), while on occasions some particularly contentious issues are left "untouched", their contemporary application depending on a case-by-case assessment of specific socio-historical circumstances. The final strategy I identified involved explaining Islamic texts by referring to sociological concepts, terminology and ideas, often

to normalise early Islamic history. Despite the labels of “traditional” and “authentic” that the institutes give to the Islamic education they provide, many of the interpretative strategies that I identified in this chapter can be traced back to the concerns raised by 18th and 19th century reformist and revival movements and their attempts to rationalise Islam in the modern world, as I describe in Chapter 2.

During my fieldwork, the instructors did not reflect critically on the strategies that they were using in practice to extract lessons vis-à-vis the methods they advocated in theory. Generally, the classes I observed did not dedicate time to this kind of critical introspection (e.g. questioning one’s approach and motivations). This resulted in a rather arbitrary and creative search for guidance in the texts. Such arbitrariness and creativity perhaps derives from the fact that the stories in the *sīra* are far removed from contemporary life. Because the instructors felt obliged to see the *sīra* as a source of guidance – that is, it must have a *function* – they approached each aspect of the *sīra* on an ad hoc basis. I believe the interpretative practices that I have categorised in this chapter are widespread in Muslim contexts today. More data, however, is required to further define, refine and develop these six strategies. In part three of the thesis, I will describe and discuss issues of methodology in more in detail.

PART THREE: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: EPISTEMOLOGIES, THE PRACTICE OF EDUCATION, ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION

Chapter 6: Contested Epistemologies and the Status of Traditional Islamic Scholarship

In this chapter, I look at how Institutes A and B conceptualised Islamic education, in particular the study of history, and how they defined the purpose of education and the place of traditional Islamic studies within the wider educational landscape. Moreover, I discuss some of issues that preoccupied both instructors, in particular the need to reclaim the status of traditional Islamic education as a legitimate science. First, I discuss the views on knowledge and history at Institutes A and B separately using examples from the *sīra* lectures, later I synthetise the findings by highlighting some key differences and similarities.

6.1 Institute A: "Pure history", subjectivism and science

Subjectivism and the position of traditional scholars

The classes at Institute A can best be described as adopting a narrative approach. Instructor A described in vivid detail the life of the Prophet. In his narrations, the instructor also included accounts about the Prophet's life that he described as not entirely "authoritative", which perhaps means "weak" by *ḥadīth* authentication standards. *Ḥadīth* authentication is a traditional methodology to assess the robustness of the reports that describe the Prophet's life, words, and actions. It looks at whether there is an uninterrupted chain of narrators going back to the Prophet, how many narrators at each given time are present in the chain, the reliability of the narrators based on their reputation and the internal consistency of the texts. The grades or levels of authenticity include "authentic/sound", "good", "weak" and "fabricated" (Musa, 2013). There are

various positions on *ḥadīth* authentication. Some argue that in the early process of transmission, reports were subjected to modification (reorganisation, redaction, embellishment) without resulting in any diminishment of their overall authenticity (Schoeler, 2010). However, others argue that the earliest *sīra* works (such as Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham) included historical events mixed with legends and creedal positions (ibid). The instructor once explained:

> Sometimes we see a story that … we wouldn't necessarily say it is an authoritative detail in the *sīra*, this is only a minor detail that happened… sometimes it gives us a very beautiful benefit that can help us or as well show us a different aspect of things. (Instructor A)

The idea of using narrations considered not fully authoritative derives from the fact that the instructor thought that premodern scholars of Islam operated with extremely high level of neutrality and rigour. The passage above, for example, was immediately followed by this explanation:

> So, the margin of error in the *sīra* is actually quite low, the biggest reason being because – and what I mean by 'margin of error' is a false report creeping in into the *sīra* as some orientalists have tried to concoct as well as some deviant sects in Islam – the margin was quite low because the *sīra* of the Prophet was so well known. (Institute A)

Here, traditional accounts of the life of the Prophet are presented in *both* scientific terms ("margin of error") and aesthetic terms ("beautiful benefit"). These terms evoke a sense of awe with regard to the entire corpus of texts and perhaps they deter people from criticising it. This is also because the instructor gives credibility to narrations that could otherwise be discarded. In the passage above, the instructor also identifies two of the perceived "adversaries" of traditional scholarship. The first adversary is an "external other" (the "orientalists") and the second an "internal other" ("deviant" sects of Islam). In this case, "deviant sect" most likely refers to the Qurʾanists, though he does not specify this. These two adversaries ("deviants" and "orientalists") appear regularly in the narratives of Instructor A.

Instructor A in this passage clearly acknowledges that there are divergent approaches to the *sīra* ("deviant sects"), yet he alludes to the "community" of Muslims being a carrier of authentic knowledge and therefore able to filter inauthentic narrations. Indirectly, the instructor emphasises unity through collective knowledge of the community. The reports circulating amongst the Muslim communities were also diverse, meaning that often multiple and contradictory versions of the same events existed. The instructor's mention of "deviant sects" seems to confirm this.

The instructor's full trust in the corpus of narrations is also presented in opposition to "orientalism", which in the lectures is often conflated with the contemporary academic study of Islam. This conflation is partly understandable. The intellectual heritage of contemporary Islamic studies in Western secular institutions partly originates in the orientalist tradition, and academics within these institutions – Muslim or non-Muslim – tend to question more openly (and fundamentally) the reliability of *ḥadīth* and *sīra* works than religious scholars. Within academia, however, positions are not as uniform as Instructor A seems to suggest. Furthermore, I would argue, academic and faith-based approaches to the study of Islam overlap and mix in contemporary academia.

Instructor A seems to engage with orientalism only symbolically, as a representation of the West's hostility that exists towards Islam. Perhaps without mentioning his work, the instructor took inspiration from Edward Said's seminal work "Orientalism" (1979), which gives a detailed account of how Western intellectuals constructed a stereotypical image of the "orient" in opposition to the West. However, Instructor A does not engage with orientalists' intellectual positions, even those that are more open to accept the historical authenticity of the traditional sources. For example, in a preface to a translation of al-Tabari, Scottish orientalist Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) writes:

To suggest … that the whole corpus of material found in the historians was invented several generations after the events is ludicrous when one becomes aware of the vastness of this

> corpus … Naturally in all this plethora of material there are differences and discrepancies, but it is amazing how much of it fits together in an interlocking whole. The problem facing scholars today is how to use all this material critically and creatively so as to gain an understanding of the beginnings of Islam which will be relevant to the needs of Muslims in the twenty-first century. (Watt, 1988, pp. XXV-XXVI)

For some, these statements can be a powerful validation of faith, a demonstration of the rigour and high quality of Islamic historical methods that confirms Instructor A's trust in premodern religious scholarship. One clear difference between Watt's approach and the instructor's, however, is that Watt argues that the traditional body of historical evidence can, and should, be explored "creatively" *and* "critically" to attend to the needs of contemporary Muslims. Criticality is one element that is largely absent from the *sīra* classes at Institute A. On the contrary, the instructor focused often on conformity and acceptance.

Instructor A is operating in a faith-based environment and so, one might argue, the grassroots education work he does is not to be compared to any type of academic work. However, both instructors asserted on multiple occasions that traditional Islamic education is equal in status to academia. They consistently position Islamic faith-based education above the academic study of Islam (this will be clearer later, when I analyse Instructor B's comments on objectivity). So, in this sense, their assertions must be assessed at face value by comparing the two forms of education because the instructors made these comparisons in the first place. Comparisons become valid *because* the instructors mention the academic study of Islam as a counterpart to traditional Islamic education. It is because of these comparisons that it becomes evident how Islamic grassroots educational institutions (online and otherwise) are thought to be instrumental to the revival of the status of traditional scholarship vis-à-vis the western(ised) university.

Moreover, Instructor A constructed the "traditional" study of history in opposition to the modern study of history. Only in modern times, he argued, have there been attempts to use the *sīra* to promote particular ideologies, but overall,

these attempts have been mitigated by traditional scholars. He considered the writing of history by pre-modern Muslim scholars to be "pure", by which the instructor means free from ideological, historical or political biases:

> The biographers of the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* were pure historians, so they would not interpolate the report based on their personal opinions or their leanings, so they wouldn't try to embellish any of what they heard … they wouldn't try to match contemporary paradigms and dominant discourse of their times. Let's say, if a political situation had changed, they wouldn't try to direct their *sīra* to suit a certain type of discourse that was dominant at that time or a certain intellectual climate, nor did they pick and choose what they wanted to believe. (Institute A)

This passage suggests that pre-modern Muslim historians were not influenced by the political, material or social circumstances of their time nor did they seek to advance any particular group or position. The insistence on "purity" seems to have the effect of raising Islamic scholarship to a status of near infallibility. The instructor's view of premodern historical reporting is not only highly improbable and idealised but also inaccurate, as recording and writing about the Prophet's life was a product of sectarian developments and political contestation. This is demonstrated by the very fact that scholars worked to filter out fabricated accounts.

Interestingly, in these passages, Instructor A does not mention Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), whose work challenges his views in several ways. To begin with, Ibn Khaldun (who lived around five hundred years after the first recorded historians of the *sīra*) highlighted the "errors of the scholars". Among these errors was the tendency to assess sources without an appropriate critical consideration due to "partiality or partisanship for opinions, sects or schools" (Alatas, 2014, p. 17). Ibn Khaldun also criticised historians who rely excessively on "transmitters" without assessing the plausibility of events, the socio-economic conditions and the general knowledge of "human nature". Ibn Khaldun's entire approach to history has been defined as "materialistic" exactly because "historical change was explained in terms of the interaction between political and economic factors" (Alatas, 2014, p. 61). He did not, in other words,

consider historians to be “pure” or unaffected by the political and socio-economic conditions of their times. On the contrary, Ibn Khaldun’s history is a “proto-sociology” where supernatural elements are rarely brought in as explanations of historical events and social conditions (Alatas, 2014, p. 61). Some have even speculated that Ibn Khaldun may have influenced French philosopher Auguste Comte (the father of sociology) and the materialism of Marx and Engels (Alatas, 2006). These examples show that the discourse of Instructor A does not recognise the gamut of Muslim experiences of writing history. The instructor’s preoccupation with objectivity seems to also run contrary to premodern Muslim scholars’ attitudes towards their own intellectual work. Many scholars were aware that their interpretations depended on their limited mental ability to understand God’s message. This attitude is captured in the phrase “and Allah knows best” that often ends legal pronouncements and other treatises. By claiming the “purity” of Islamic scholarship, the instructor rejects the diversity and contradiction that exist in premodern scholarship.

In Instructor A’s opinion, the subjective method is a European innovation that colonised Muslims and threatened the “purity” of Muslim scholarship:

> Because the Muslims were weak, they started looking outside of their civilization for the answers to why they were being colonized and why they were being overpowered from Europe, so there was a new school that rose up that relied on what you call the subjective method … [which] was first championed by Sigmund Freud, the father of, you could say, modern psychiatry. (Institute A)

To understand why the reference to Freud seemed important to the instructor, I consulted the modern *sīra* books mentioned in the class and found very similar comments on Freud’s subjective method in the *Jurisprudence of the Prophetic Biography* authored by Syrian scholar Ramadan al-Buti (2001). Al-Buti begins the chapter, *Prophetic biography in the light of the modern way of writing history,* by writing that Freud was a proponent of the “subjective method”, which “saw no harm in the historian interpolating his own subjective preferences or intellectual, religious and political inclinations into the explanation and analysis

of events" (p. 68-69). The next passage shows how Instructor A paraphrased al-Buti's words:

> Freud's take on how to analyse historical narrations and facts was that *you must interpolate* what you are reporting and you must be critical and subjective, using your own inclinations – so using your own ideas and your own experiences according to the values that you hold and the times that you are in – in order to interpret what you report and bring it out in a light that is relevant to what people believe in your time, so that could change obviously from time to time from person to person, from audience to audience. (Institute A)

Here, Instructor A uses the notions of "criticality" and "subjectivity" to critique moral relativism (the idea that there is no universal truth and morality is context-dependant) and subjectivism (the idea that all knowledge is subjective to human perception). The instructor seems to argue here that Freud wanted historians to interpret evidence based on their personal feelings and motivations. His (and therefore al-Buti's) interpretation of the subjective method is left unchallenged. Refutations of ideas that are considered "Western", "secular" or "academic" is common in the online *daʿwa* landscape. Some Muslim influencers and organisations engage in public refutations of Western/secular paradigms in order to support their Islamic positions, often without properly quoting or engaging seriously with the original sources (Baz, 2017). This is done either by upholding or refuting philosophical/scientific positions opportunistically, depending on whether they support or contradict specific religious positions.

In this instance, it is most likely the case that Instructor A simply paraphrased al-Buti's work and adopted his positions uncritically. In the case of subjectivism, it is peculiar that the instructor mentions Freud in the context of the study of history. Leopold von Ranke is sometimes called the "father of the modern science of history" (Muir, 1987). He is notable for his view that the job of the historian should be to tell accurate and objective facts about history from primary sources, without trying to induce abstract theories or moral lessons from the historical evidence. In his view, the search for objectivity is incompatible with the extrapolation of moral lessons. Contrary to Von Ranke's

views, Instructor A was adamant that it is possible to read history objectively (*merely* reporting accurate facts) *while simultaneously* drawing moral lessons from it. The idea of objective reporting has been criticised in academia, for example, consider the following questions:

> Are there such things as pure historical facts? Can history ever be anything more than an account of past points of view or at best a comparison of past and present views? (…) Without an interpretive context, a fact, in and of itself, means nothing and in different contexts could mean different things. (Muir, 1987, p. 9)

This passage effectively encapsulates the "interpretative turn" in academia, which Instructor A saw represented by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). But why did instructor have such problem with subjectivism? As I have shown in Chapter 5, in the instructor's lectures the reporting of facts is accompanied by moral lessons that are often also presented as objective, universal maxims or rules (i.e. instructions from God). Subjectivist positions of any kind (i.e. the idea that "facts" can have different meanings to different people) are therefore problematic to Instructor A precisely because they can lead to moral relativism.

In this case, Instructor A excludes some important observations about subjectivism. For example, claiming that the process of interpretation of data is subjective does not mean doing away with reality or rigour; it means simply reflecting on potential biases and influences. The analysis must always be substantiated with evidence and should be able to withstand critique. Whether with a moral or simply explorative agenda, historical research attempts to make sense of evidence by building a narrative that will eventually undergo some scrutiny. In addition, scholars should be prepared to modify their views when presented with new evidence if it contradicts their theories, or accept more convincing interpretations of existing evidence.

Freud's subjectivism does not represent a justification for unlimited, unchecked, or whimsical interpretative freedom, as Instructor A suggests, but simply an

acknowledgement that there is no way to interpret data in a vacuum; all human beings "see" data from a particular perspective. The idea that people are subjective interpreters of the world was called "countertransference" by Freud and it was an acknowledgment that:

> The significance that historians see in their material, the criteria they apply, the feeling of conviction they impart, the intellectual model they build and find congenial are functions of personal psychodynamics. We can research and write rigorously and truthfully about the past only if we remain aware that this is always a transaction between the historian and his or her data. (Runyan, 1988, pp. 146-147).

Reflecting on how one reacts to historical data can therefore offer valuable information about the subject matter itself. For example, one can understand how social conditions or the meanings we attach to things have changed over time. Instructor A did not cite the original source when he paraphrased al-Buti's arguments and did not engage critically with his work. The characterisation of modern European philosophy as "whimsical subjectivism" and the association of premodern Islamic scholarship with "neutrality and purity" present an oversimplified and exaggerated picture that does not reflect the diversity and nuance that exists in both contexts.

For Instructor A, the notion of "subjectivity" "erases this concept of pure history, of objective, impartial history that the Muslims had been standing on for twelve hundred years". He claims that with subjectivity, the very idea of history is no longer "a science, it became an art, and it became somewhat a piece of entertainment or a philosophy, rather than a pure science". In these emotive comments, Instructor A claims that the modern study of history threatens the "concept of pure history", which he definez as a "pure science", that is practised by premodern Muslims. The instructor uses terminology from the hard sciences to describe Islamic traditional historiography, perhaps to raise the status of Islam above that of modern science.

Constantly dichotomising (Western) academia and (Islamic) traditional scholarship also leads to a failure to acknowledge how the latter may have

influenced the development of modern disciplines, including the social sciences. As such, some of the "messiness" of cultural transmission is lost, that is, the online lectures observed fail to acknowledge how certain elements of culture are adopted and transformed in other contexts, while others become extinct. It is important to account for the multidimensional nature of these processes to avoid oversimplifying complex realities. In the online classroom, the instructor sets Islam against the West on several occasions. For Instructor A, "subjectivism" comes to represent the "West". In the online lectures, the West is not a geographical location, rather the word sometimes is used as a shorthand for the phenomenon of colonialism. In the narrative, the "West" i.e. Western colonialism, destabilises the absolute truth of divine revelation. Objective history comes to represent "Islam", a fixed entity across time and space.

Accepting an epistemology where knowledge is "subjective" to individual, social and political influences therefore is tantamount to accepting a defeat from colonialism. The claim that history is a "pure science" therefore has both epistemological and political implications. Consider for example, the following passage:

> For a long time the field of *sīra* and prophetic biography remained untampered … the '*ʿulamaʾ* of *ahl us-sunna*[9] were the flag-bearers of preserving an authentic tradition… through the ages and so, after the weakening of the Muslim *umma* [people, community] and the Muslim empire around the times of colonialism … there was a concerted effort from the part of European colonialists to divorce the *umma* from their scholars, because in order to affect the people they colonised, they realized they would had to break their reliance … on the Muslim scholars. Institute A

Here, the connection between traditional scholarship and colonialism becomes explicit. The instructor does not explain how European colonisers attempted to divorce Muslims from their traditional knowledge (the scholars), but I assume,

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[9] Translated as 'the scholars of the people (or followers) of the Sunna', that is, scholars who belong to mainstream Sunni orthodox Islam.

as I described in Chapter 2, that it has to do with educational dualism and the marginalisation of traditional religious authorities.

Instructor A also explained that Europe had been experiencing drastic intellectual, political and social changes since the Enlightenment period that reached Muslims through colonisation. Muslim civilisations have not lacked external influences, for example, from Hellenistic, Persian and Indian culture (Sonn, 1996). The sheer quantity of customs, practices and traits that were adopted by Muslims in public administration, legal and political life and culture is well documented. However, interaction with different cultures prior to European colonialism occurred for Muslims in a position of power (as colonisers themselves). This position of weakness in relation to the West troubles Instructor A.

Instructor A's concern that Western academic approaches like subjectivism can be used (and have been used historically) to corrupt the Islamic faith is not uncommon. In a YouTube video, popular religious scholar Yasir Qadhi, when asked about his experience of studying first in Medina university and then at Yale, warned that Western education "scrambles your brain completely". He explained:

> What the Western education does is that it historicizes, it contextualizes. It forces you to rethink. Medina, Azhar, Malaysia, Islamabad will build the building for you. When you go to Harvard, Princeton, Yale (they) will deconstruct the whole building … Then you're going to have to figure out how you are going to reconstruct it, they are not even going to do it for you. This is the reality of western education. (Qadhi, 2015)

Qadhi's position here is ambivalent. He explains that "deconstructing the building" means becoming aware that the Islam "you inherited from Azhar and Medina is not the building that Allah revealed. It's a building that is constructed over centuries". Here, there is a clear acknowledgement that the "building" of Islam is a result of human interpretations and interactions under different social conditions. From the above passage, it seems that the academic study of Islam is a worthy endeavour, after all, it makes people reflect on contexts, factors and

trends. There is a caveat, however, as engagement with academia is transformative, but not in a good way, “I have seen this myself”, Qadhi explained, “many practising Muslims have gone into these programmes and come out either agnostic or preaching a version of Islam that I find very unpalatable” (Qadhi, 2015).

Qadhi’s words helped me understand Instructor A’s position in context. Institute A’s mission is to construct the “building”, perhaps the foundations of the building, while Islamic studies within academic departments are seen to be actively demolishing the building by dissecting its parts and giving each one context. The concern of these religious scholars is that the academic approach leads for many to the abandonment of deep-seated, fixed beliefs. In Qadhi’s opinion, only a few elect people can juggle both faith and academia. His narrative exalts believers who practise their faith with a deep seated belief unaffected by academic concerns. Similarly, to Instructor A, Qadhi is concerned that academia and science have come to replace the role of religion in society. This new “religion”, moreover, promotes ideas that he considers inconsistent with Islam, such as queer theory or Darwinism. This view holds therefore that believers should approach academia prudently to protect that deep-seated conviction. This wariness was also shared by Instructor A.

In this section, I have argued that Instructor A’s epistemological rejection of subjectivism represents a political attitude against Western colonialism, which in his opinion continues to influence Muslims through the institutions of Western academia. The “traditional versus modern” concern is prevalent within the Islamic education landscape and, as shown in Chapter 2, is resolved in different ways. In the case of Instructor A, there seems to be an opportunistic-rejectionist approach, that is, some elements of Western education are rejected if they contradict his religious convictions while others are embraced if they can advance the religion (e.g. technological innovations). In the next section, I analyse another epistemological position of Instructor A, namely, his views on causality and the unseen.

Causality, empiricism and spiritual reality (the unseen)

Instructor A's arguments appear to be fairly representative of this "Islam vs West" attitude that has dominated debates in Islamic education until today. The critique of Western paradigms and Muslim modernist approaches is embedded in the instructor's attitudes towards history. This critique is further developed in the lectures when Instructor A discusses the "proper place" of science and the hierarchy of knowledge as he highlighted the obligation of believing in miracles. Discussions on different types of figurative and literal interpretations of the texts have abounded in Islamic thought (Gleave, 2012; Heinrichs, 2016) and the rejection of miracles is known in the Muslim tradition, with symbolic interpretations of the texts gaining more ground from the 18th and 19th centuries (K. Ali, 2014). As I will also show with examples from Instructor B's classes, Instructor A criticises knowledge that relies exclusively on empirical evidence and the reduction of reality to purely cause-and-effect dynamics.

At Institute A, the instructor's critique of sciences emerges on a few occasions, often when the instructor discusses miracles (while Instructor B has a different stance on miracles, as shown later). Consider, for example, this passage:

> Science has not explained everything that we want to know, and it has not reached all the heights and solved all the problems that we expected to be solved (…) how in the world did water come out of the Prophet's *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* fingers when he gave drink to so many hundreds of companions? Now we know that cause and effect are not necessarily related to one another. This is something that imam Ghazali discussed centuries before… (Institute A)

While the problem of subjectivity related mainly to the affirmation of the role of the Muslim scholar as an objective narrator of history, in the above passage the instructor juxtaposes miracles to science. His concern with miracles uncovers the instructor's broader position on science. He quotes Ghazali, who is often idolised as the scholar who guarded the religion from the philosophers' overdependence on rationality (Arjmand, 2018; Bagheri & Khosravi, 2006).

Instructor A argued for the supremacy of the religious sciences over the laws of nature:

> We make links between a cause and an effect but this doesn't necessarily mean that science can explain why a certain thing is happening, so now that we have come back and put science in its proper place, giving it its respect and its role, we've understood that Allah creates science, ok, but it is not that Allah is bound by science so … he can bypass [it] whenever He wants to, and that's what we call a miracle. (Institute A)

In instructor A's opinion, science has a distinct position that is inferior to religion, because "God can bypass science". He also affirms that there is currently a revival of religious belief that is revisiting this hierarchy ("now that we have come back and put science in the proper place"). Comments on cause and effect recurred on different occasions, often casually and in passing, for example:

> Don't think that … what we're talking about here is just dry history and that what you're living in your life is just mundane cause and effect … this learning, these lessons… it's not about learning dry history but it should increase us in *ʾīmān* (faith) and faith and certainty and love. Institute A

"History", by which he means the biography of the Prophet, should not be "dry"; it should strengthen faith. This view calls for an emotional response. Learning the life of the Prophet thus means moving away from the idea that history and reality are simply driven by cause and effect, it should offer an opportunity to experience spirituality. In this view, focusing solely on cause and effect means living a mundane, faithless life. In this passage the focus on objectivity and religion as a "science", which the instructor had focused on in his critique of subjectivism, is replaced by a focus on faith and emotions. The dissatisfaction with a meaningless life lived without the supernatural, turns into a critique of the ubiquity of secular and scientific language, which, the instructor argues, can be counteracted by engaging in everyday "speech acts" that state/create the spiritual reality that Muslims believe in. Consider, for example:

> In terms of affirming belief in miracles, we have to teach Muslims as well … we should not be sceptical or afraid to admit this, many times we use the language of 'quote and quote' belief, rather than the language of truth. Someone would ask us, is it true that you've got an angel sitting on your shoulders, two angels, and we'll say to this person, if they are not a believer, "Yes, *Muslims believe* that there are two angels around each shoulder". In reality, we should say, "*There are* two angels on the shoulders of every single human being'. (Institute A) (my emphases)

In this passage the instructor criticises the preference for sociological language over the language that affirms a religious reality for Muslims, such as the presence of angels in our day-to-day life. He continues by describing how the first Muslims were not shy in showing their beliefs, even at the risk of being mocked.

Instructor A laments the fact that Muslims have supposedly become used to speaking a 'sociological language' ('Muslims believe two angels…') and wants them instead to talk about belief as if it were a 'theological reality', not an ethnographic curiosity. The importance the instructor puts on stating belief as a fact ("there are two angels") recalls Austin's "speech act" theory, that is, the idea that people construct their reality through speech. In this case, they assert the reality of Islamic theology (and therefore their "Muslimness") through everyday language. This represents a (perhaps unintentional) constructivist position, an indirect acknowledgement that language is performative (i.e. makes reality). The instructor here is also reiterating the necessity for Muslims to avoid doubt at all costs and commit to Islamic beliefs, but his complaint is also directed towards "sociological" approaches to religious education and, I will argue later, the social sciences in general. The critique of "sociological language" contributes to the instructor's hierarchy of knowledge and links back to the discussion on modern/Western academic methods versus Islamic traditional methods that I mentioned earlier. Here, there is an attempt to create a hierarchy of knowledge, where the natural sciences are inferior to the religious sciences, and the social sciences are inferior to the natural sciences.

The passage above not only captures the distinction that is drawn between two pedagogical approaches to teaching religion but also highlights why this

distinction is important. These two pedagogical strategies can be called (for the purpose of categorising) the Geertzian and Asadian approaches. The Geertzian approach takes inspiration from anthropology and *teaches about religion* by providing students accounts of the beliefs and practices of a religious community in the "third person" (Muslims believe so and so). The "Asadian" approach teaches religion from the point of view of the believer (in the confessional way), by focusing, as Asad did, on textual traditions (Fujiwara 2016). The first approach is associated with the teaching of religion in secular contexts while the second follows a syllabus agreed by the faith community and presupposes a commitment to the faith (Morris, 2013).

The example of how Muslims should talk about angels represents, in my view, Instructor A's awareness of the predominance of the Geertzian anthropological approach in wider society, what he calls the "language of quotes". This approach reflects the way many Muslims in the West, who are raised in multi-faith realities, might experience their religion in secular schools. This, for the instructor, has real consequences in a believer's perception, not just of their faith, but also of reality itself. When believing Muslims become accustomed to say "Muslims believe so and so", they might unintentionally internalise that this belief is not an absolute, universal truth but a belief from one particular point of view. Rejecting the sociological language also has implications in that it can contribute to denying diversity within Islam, as not all Muslims share the same beliefs. So, there are three levels of language that can be used to speak about faith: language of truth ("*there are* two angels…"), *inter-religious* sociological language ("*Muslims believe* there are two angels…") and *intra-religious* sociological language ("*some Muslims* believe there are two angels…"). The use of language changes the perception of reality. To tackle doubt and insecurity about belief among secularly educated Muslims, Instructor A is indirectly homogenising belief.

By marginalising modern science and affirming the rigour of the Islamic traditional disciplines, including the belief in miracles, Instructor A is seeking to

promote a spiritual experience of everyday life against the backdrop of an increasingly secularising society.

6.2 Institute B: Rigour, the status of Muslim scholarship and the empirical sciences

To introduce institute B's approach to the study of history, it is useful to first provide some observations about the academic undergraduate module I attended at Institute C. The differences between Institutes B and C really provide a window to understanding Instructor B's concerns. At the undergraduate level, it was clear that course C of the biography of the Prophet intended to introduce students to a multiplicity of methods and types of historical evidence. During the lessons, Instructor C introduced students to both the faith-based approach of narrating the biography through traditional accounts and modern methods, such as contemporary philological, palaeographic and archaeological approaches to the study of early Islamic history. The latter approach includes radiocarbon dating, a chemical test that seeks to determine the age of an organic sample. In Islamic studies, this method has been used to test ancient parchments. Another example of this kind of contemporary academic engagement with the sources is the *Corpus Coranicum*, a project that aims to reconstruct the Qurʾan using ancient manuscripts and then analyse them in their historical context (Rippin, 2013).

At Institute C, the issues discussed were in great part methodological: students were encouraged to look critically at the reasons why an author would prioritise certain sources over others with a particular focus on the implicit assumptions made and the historical context in which the author's argument developed. At Institutes A and B, efforts were made to list the sources chronologically, especially early biographies, and provide some comments on more recent works in the first introductory lesson. However, ongoing methodological

discussions on trends and approaches, of the kind observed at Institute C, were absent in the online *sīra* classes.

At Institute C, a clear distinction was also made between the "traditional story", which was presented in a descriptive manner, and the academic study of the Prophet's biography, which was presented as a dynamic field undergoing theoretical and methodological developments. Instructor C produced an overview of academic trends in this field: traditionalists who worked with Muslim textual sources (Montgomery Watt) and who were criticised by revisionists (John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Gerald Hawting) and extreme revisionists (Yehuda Nevo, Judith Koren, Ibn Warraq, Christophe Luxenberg) who rejected to various degrees these sources and sought other types of data.

Contrary to the classes at Institute A, where the key message to students was to hold on to a fixed certainty, at Institute C *scepticism* was an important tool used to explore texts. For example, when Instructor C introduced the *sahifa* (the "constitution" drafted by the Prophet upon his arrival in Medina), he said:

> We don't have the original document yet, but even academics who are very sceptical and question most things, they don't question this document, (for example) Patricia Crone mentions it as a 'solid rock'. (Institute C)

In this passage, the view in support of the authenticity of this document of a revisionist academic (Patricia Crone), is offered as a further confirmation of the text's authenticity. Secondly, the sentence "we don't have the original document *yet*" implies open-endedness and work-in-progress, the possibility of further discovery, the possibility of changing one's mind.

On another occasion, when Instructor C was discussing the role of archaeological evidence in reconstructing the events in the Prophet's biography, a student asked:

> Student: "Is the Prophet's mosque used as archaeological evidence (today)?"

Instructor C: “No, because it is used as a site of pilgrimage… the people who are there *don't have the same questions*, they say, “we have the traditional narrations, why should (we) dig up?” (Institute C)

This point summarises well the key difference between two approaches: the academic study of Islam and faith-based Islamic education. Overall, the two approaches should not be considered particuarly different in terms of methodology. The point of contention is around what the two types of education are trying to achieve and what questions are being asked. The methodological question is consequential to the question of purpose, as methodology adapts to the learning goals. In academia, the production of “original knowledge” (discovering how things work, new perspectives and ways of doing things) is valuable currency as well as imparting specific values (freedom, pluralism, individualism, innovation, entrepreneurship, etc.). For this reason, Instructor C’s approach encouraged open-mindedness towards data and focused on methodological questions that would expose students to a broad range of historical views and sources.

Instructors A and B focused instead respectively on building a narrative exclusively based on traditional accounts. Their effort to understand history was limited to the traditional sources because they believe these sources are the most reliable, thus they have no incentive to challenge them. The two instructors actively opposed the possibility of finding a more reliable truth elsewhere. Instructor B’s approach is particularly interesting because he encouraged his students to engage in independent and open-ended research, but only within the framework of traditional Islam. To defend Islamic historiography, Instructor B offered a specific criticism of academic methods, in particular the analysis of archaeological evidence:

You cannot build history on stones; stones can help but… you build history on reports. Why should we copy those who get history from stones? Sometimes coins etc. can help but reports of course, reports are the main sources. You cannot make history by inferring, or just by thinking, history cannot come other than by reports. (Institute B)

Above, Instructor B is engaging with the issue of methods and types of historical data and juxtaposing traditional methods with modern archaeology and the academic study of Islam. “Stones” and “coins” are symbolic of the material evidence used in the contemporary study of early Islam, which includes papyri, inscriptions on buildings and tombs (Brockopp, 2015a). The instructor’s concern is to preserve the traditional Islamic method of studying history by making Muslims aware that they should not copy modern historians (“those who take history from stones”). After showing initial openness to other methods (“stones can help”), the sentence “history cannot come other than by reports”, implies an unequivocal preference for traditional accounts, premodern historiography, and religious authority.

In the same lecture, Instructor B also positions Muslim scholarship today vis-à-vis contemporary academia by emphasising that being a believer and a scholar are not incompatible:

> Islam is not against being academic, Islam is not against being professional, but it is important, Muslims have to make an effort, you don’t have to take away your Islam to be an academic. (Institute B)

This passage refers to debates within the academic study of religion on whether scholars of religion should adopt a methodologically agnostic position, that is “bracket out” their beliefs momentarily, when studying religious phenomena. Agnosticism indicates “the idea that academics must adopt a neutral, value-free position with respect to the study of religions” (Cox, 2003, p. 2). This has led some universities to include a “secular clause” that “prohibits the teaching of religion *per se”*, and to focus instead on “teaching *about* religion” (Morris, 2013, p. 12). This position often argues that religion must be seen as a human phenomenon and questions whether it is possible to critique a body of religious traditions and practices as a believer/insider. Methodological agnosticism argues that scholars of religion must not assume that “books fall from heaven” nor should they “repeat stories that Muslims tell themselves”, as this would

mean moving "outside of the domain of scholarship and into the murky realm of apologetics" (Hughes, 2007, p. 82).

In response to this view, Instructor B here highlights the rigour of the traditional methods of transmitting and assessing reports because he wants Muslim scholarship to be taken seriously. Other scholars of Islam have grappled with the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion and reflected upon the pros and cons of being deeply involved in the religion they wish to study (Bazzano, Truschke, & Yeo, 2016). Instructor B does not offer a detailed analysis of agnosticism, he simply responds to arguments that agnostic, or generally non-believing, researchers are in a better position to assess the data objectively. The instructor interprets the difficulty of analysing religious texts critically in terms of professionalism, that is, the skill or competency to carry out research rigorously as a believer. Here, Instructor B is not only setting Islamic (faith-based) scholarship against academia, but he is also making a claim about *the right* of traditional scholarship *to belong* to academia.

This right would involve contributing to the research agenda, that is, determining the purpose of the academic study of Islam, the research questions to be asked and the research activities to be conducted. This means that the same argument made by Instructor C, that traditional scholars ask qualitatively different questions to those asked by academic scholars, is used by religious scholars *in reverse*: that academic study of Islam asks questions that are simply irrelevant to Muslims. For example, in 2015, Haitham Al-Haddad posted an article on a popular UK-based Islamic blog ("Islam for the 21st Century") in which he commented on the news of the discovery of possibly one of the oldest Qurʾanic manuscripts ever found. Such discovery was extensively covered by mainstream media. In this article al-Haddad emphatically encouraged Muslims to *ignore* the finding. In the introduction to this article, he wrote:

> When I first read the news about the findings … I was not so excited nor was I bothered very much. For me, the infamous talk by David Cameron that was delivered less than twenty-four hours (sic) was more important news. (Al-Haddad, 2015)

On the surface, this appears to be an attempt to dissuade Muslims from being interested in new discoveries about early Islam. But why? Perhaps, as Al-Haddad writes, they simply distract the Muslim community from more pressing political issues, such as the very existence of the Muslim community being threatened by excessive state surveillance. The “more important news” was the now former Prime Minister David Cameron’s speech about counterterrorism, which many Muslim organisations condemned. With this statement, al-Haddad directed Muslims away from this academic discovery in an attempt to raise political awareness. In this article, Al-Haddad however also writes that there is no need to use such discoveries to confirm the truth that Muslims already know from traditional sources. Perhaps the problem is that the open-endedness of discovery unlocks the possibility of being exposed to alternative theories, as well as inconsistencies, and possibly doubt. In this article, Al-Haddad is adamant that Muslims already have a “sophisticated methodology” to *respond* to findings that may contradict traditional accounts. He portrays academic knowledge as a distraction, and the exultance of some Muslims over this discovery as an indication of weak faith. This position is not a total rejection of academia, however, as al-Haddad himself has encouraged Muslims to take secular subjects at university, the problem is which “questions are being asked”, i.e. how the study of Islam is being framed.

In a similar way, Instructor B called for traditional methodologies to have a place in academia. He encouraged independent learning, and, for this reason, he objected to the idea that the researcher’s religiosity might be an obstacle to conducting good research. Instructor B once explained:

If you’re a believer you’ll make more an effort to know, any incident of the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam,* you think, if you’re a Muslim you dig deeper, you have more reason to do proper study. (Institute B)

In another passage, Instructor B comments on the issue of subjectivity and complains about the academic trend that encourages people to study Islam from non-Muslims because they supposedly would be more "objective" than Muslims. He explains:

> In the West when you study, they put in your mind that Muslims are biased. [They say] "if you want to study the *sīra* of the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* don't read books written by Muslims, if you want to read the history of Islam don't study books written from Muslims, because they are biased, read only books written by non-Muslims ..." There's nothing more stupid in the history of human kind than this claim, when you have to study maths, do you go to people who don't know about mathematics? But they tell you, study Islam from non-Muslims, this thing happens only in Islam. (Institute B)

The instructor's argument is that the religious believers who study their faith will naturally care more about finding the truth and so will evaluate the sources more thoroughly. Instructor B does not consider here that it is exactly this deep investment in the faith that concerns the proponents of "methodological agnosticism". This is because for a researcher whose identity, family and community relations are deeply invested in certain beliefs, it may be more difficult to engage in types of inquiry that question foundational issues of those beliefs. It is also the case, however, that a critical engagement with the faith from a believer's perspective is possible, especially if your faith is attached to the intellectual process of engaging with traditions rather than to a set of fixed beliefs that, if challenged, make the whole "building" collapse.

In the passage quoted above, Instructor B draws a parallel between learning "from people who know mathematics" and learning from Muslims. This appears to be a problematic parallel, as religious identity (i.e. being Muslim) is not an indicator of expertise nor does it correspond to a qualification (like being a mathematician). Nevertheless, Instructor B echoes some important concerns about how religious studies scholars who are also believers can be perceived in academia as outsiders, and how this perception can affect their work (Pembroke, 2011). He also noted that Islam seems to have a special position in this debate, as "neutrality" becomes especially important in the study of

Islam. He claimed that the same academics do not have a problem, for example, to learn Hinduism from Hindu scholars.

Instructor B also offers an unfaltering critique of empiricism and the social sciences more in general, in a striking resemblance to the concerns expressed by Instructor A:

Qurʾan and *ḥadīth* are the source. In our time, there's an (effort) everywhere in Muslim society to reform Muslim society. Thinkers, Muslim reformers are very similar to non-Muslim thinkers, Muslim thinkers and secular thinkers don't differ, these people become *impressed or influenced* by certain problems of their society and so they just want to solve that problem, so this is very negative … Among these secular thinkers you can see an example … Karl Marx in the 19th century. (Instructor B)

The instructor identifies intellectuals as a category of people who become captivated by specific problems to the point that they see the whole society and, most importantly, interpret scripture through these problems. He feels that Muslim reformers, like Mawdudi, have been influenced by these modern methodologies. He identifies social theory (epitomised by Karl Marx) as a negative influence that has skewed the worldview of Muslim reformers. Karl Marx represents for Instructor B what Sigmund Freud represents for Instructor A: a symbol of a modern methodology that has corrupted Muslims.

Furthermore, the instructor combines this hostility towards the social sciences with political quietism. For example:

So, when we read *ḥadīth* and Qurʾan, we have to think, what's happening? Is the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* a thinker like these people (i.e reformers)? When the Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* became nearly 42, what he did? Did he research what was the problem in Mecca and wanted to solve the problems? There were problems in Mecca, there are weak people, and rich people… they are oppressing them, and I guess orphans, what did the Prophet do, did he bring a reform to society? (Institute B)

Here, Instructor B adopts an anti-scientific stance when he claims that the Prophet did not make observations about (nor did he engage in an empirical analysis of) his own society. Consequently, the instructor argues, the Prophet also did not seek to identify social problems or find solutions. For these reasons, Muslims should also not use empirical procedures to assess societal problems,

that is, they should not attempt to tackle the issues that affect their societies. This anti-scientific (or better, anti-empiricist) view impacts directly on the instructor's theory of activism and social change. In the instructor's view, the Prophet, the definitive model for all Muslims, was never a social theorist or activist; he just followed orders from God:

> He went on Mount Hira, where he contemplates, where he thinks … The Prophets don't introduce any solution to any problem of (their) own mind; actually, they don't identify problems from their own mind … People think we know the problem and we know the solution, so … we don't know the problem because in humanity you cannot know your own problem you have to have external guidance. (Institute B)

The above passage suggests that because humans have limited intellect, they should simply follow revelation. The instructor, however, also admits that prioritising revelation is only for a specific range of issues:

> Allah has given you mind and reason for some things but there are some issues for which your reasoning is not helpful, you need help from Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā* but you can understand his help, so when He teaches you, you know what it means […] so you have to understand the limit of reasoning and thinking […] because there are many factors, which you don't know, humble people ask Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā*. (Instructor B)

Instructor B explains that there are matters on which revelation has nothing to say (where Muslims can use their own thinking) but that there are clear limits to reason in other aspects of life; that's where Muslims ought to follow revelation. There are narrations that describe the Prophet as abandoning his own opinion over someone else's because others had more experience of a particular field, e.g. the narrations of the pollination of the date palms in a popular *ḥadīth* collection (Muslim al Hajjaj's Al-Sahih).

The criteria to understand which issues should require religious guidance and which should rely on reasoning was not discussed in any detail by the instructor. Because the Islamic traditions cover a wide range of areas of life, establishing these criteria seems intuitively important, yet the separation between religious and mundane is not straightforward. For example, there are potentially laws

and norms that extend to aspects of life that could be considered personal or lifestyle choices (e.g. dress) or "secular" (e.g. finance and trade). Due to the lack of detail, Instructor B's comments seem problematic and at times contradictory. I will discuss the implications of this lack of precision in Chapter 9.

6.3 Epistemological positions adopted by the online instructors: some final observations

There are practices in education that reinforce differences between groups in society. One such practice is drawing a distinction between the academic study of Islam and Islamic education in grassroots settings, the latter is usually defined as "lived religion" while the former takes the label of "expertise". Such practice replicates the same unequal power relationships that exist between "informants" and "researchers". The researcher acquires knowledge in the field and becomes the "expert" on certain issues, while informants add to the body of knowledge of the researcher without the same recognition. The distinction that Instructor C drew between traditional accounts of the *sīra* and the analysis of academic research on early Islam seems to reproduce these group distinctions and power dynamics (i.e. Muslim education vs. academic research).

To elucidate how this distinction is drawn and often complicated by different factors, I want to briefly describe a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) led by Gabriel Reynolds of Notre Dame University[10], *Introduction to the Qurʾan*, which I attended in 2017. Throughout this course, there were several lessons dedicated to various academic approaches to studying the Qurʾan, while one

[10] The course is archived here https://www.edx.org/course/introduction-to-the-quran-the-scripture-of-islam Last accessed 04/08/20

lesson was dedicated to “traditional approaches”. The latter was visibly different to all other lessons. In this lesson, Reynolds was filmed asking basic questions about Islam to a local *imam* (prayer leader) who spoke in simple English whilst sitting on the carpet of a mosque. The conversation between the two was not based on the academic qualifications or religious education of the *imam*, which means that the *imam* was not expected to engage in discussions about approaches, trends, theories or methods in the study of Islam. The visit of the course leader to the local mosque offered an “authentic” field-trip-like experience. In another video, the course leader was filmed interviewing a respected Muslim scholar, Ibrahim Moosa. Moosa was asked to elaborate on theological issues. The conversation with Moosa was primarily about his education and his theories, rather than his identity and religious practice. His traditional Islamic education and his “Muslimness” were mentioned – it seemed – because they added some depth to his engagement with Western academia. The interview with the *imam* at the mosque was meant to offer an ethnographic snapshot of “lived Islam”, so the conversation focused on being Muslim in Muslim spaces. Moosa represented instead, contemporary “academic Islam”, thus he occupied an academic space by sitting on a chair in a university office. The way the course was organised reinforced the idea that tradition and religious practice reside in the “field” while education and expertise reside in academia. At the very least, it sent a message that intellectual work does not happen within the spaces of “lived Islam”, but “lived Islam” provides ethnographic material for academia.

This example helps to empathise with Instructor B’s concern that academia does not take traditionally trained Islamic scholars seriously. Although there have been critical efforts to develop and understand partnerships between academic and faith-based institutes, the question being asked here is whether the academic study of Islam in the curriculum is organised in a way that makes faith-based engagement with Islam appear as parrot-like, uncritical and/or not “academic” enough. The assumptions that are made about where “lived Islam”

ought to be found (for example, in a mosque) or cannot be found (for example, in a Western university) can reveal important information about how knowledge/expertise is defined and organised as well as how such distinctions are blurred or actively challenged.

To challenge what he perceives as a stereotypical image of traditional Muslim scholarship, Instructor B stresses the "academic-ness" (i.e rigour of the classical Islamic disciplines). He does this by using various means, for example by refuting beliefs that are popularly held by Muslims, such as the miracles attributed to the Prophet prior to prophethood. Instructor B is affirming that Muslims have both belief and a sound methodology and that these two elements are not inherently incompatible. Both Instructors A and B addressed issues that they felt attacked or undermined Islam and traditional Muslim scholarship. These concerns, however, are not exclusive to religious/faith-based contexts either. Since 9/11 at least, scholars of Islam in academia have also found themselves asking essentialist questions about the "nature" of Islam, under the influence of the wider political climate (Hughes, 2007). Scholars sometimes note, for example, "the growth of irenic scholarship", which "saw Islamicists increasingly getting into the trenches to help save the Muslims and their image" (Esack, 2013, p. 38). Esack argues that this type of defensive scholarship "raises significant questions about fidelity to the post-Enlightenment foundations of critical scholarship". Furthermore, it contributes to the creation of "compliant Muslim subjects in a larger hegemonic project" (Esack, 2013, p. 39).

At the two institutes, the effort to defend Muslim scholarship plays a role of accommodation as well as contestation. The instructors are equally concerned with showing that Islamic traditional scholarship has the same characteristics, and therefore value, as "mainstream" academic scholarship (e.g. professionalism, rigour, objectivity) while critiquing Western scholarship for other reasons (overreliance on "subjective" interpretations, inference from archaeological evidence and so on). As a result, contemporary faith-based

scholarship takes shape in relation to Western academia (and the academic study of Islam). The instructors' choices regarding sources and methods thus define their identity in relation to other (mainly secular) educational spaces. These findings are consistent with the argument that Islam is actively constructed in antithesis to the narratives that are produced in the Western academy (Hughes, 2007). Instructors A and B chose a moderate course by presenting Islam as simultaneously compatible with secular/Western society as well as capable of challenging secular/Western ideas. This duality is exhibited in simultaneous expressions of admiration and dissatisfaction towards the West, as I will explore in more detail in the next chapters.

This chapter has explored the epistemological and methodological positions taken by Instructors A and B in their classes. The two instructors shared strikingly similar preoccupations but adopted different epistemological solutions: Instructor A emphasised uncritical admiration towards premodern scholars of Islam and took a strong position against subjectivism, which he perceived to be a Western paradigm that threatens the purity of Islamic scholarship. Instructor B, on the other hand, claimed a place for Islamic scholarship in academia by emphasising the expertise and rigour of Islamic scholarship. The instructors treated the traditional methods of analysing the chains of narrations as a scientific approach that can uncover how events truly happened in the past. This focus on rigour is due to the fact that in academia, the historicity of Muslim sources has been put into question (Crone & Cook, 1977; Hoyland, 2014; Schacht, 1953). In the classes, especially at Institute A, "critique" of Muslim sources was often associated with a form of "doubt" that must be extinguished. Both institutes had their own unique approaches to raising the status of traditional disciplines. Instructor A claimed that Western paradigms "infiltrated" Muslim classical scholarship, which was originally otherwise "pure", i.e unbiased. Instructor B's narrative was more nuanced and mainly emphasised the rigour of traditional disciplines.

The two instructors broadly agreed on the sources that should be used to teach the origins of Islam – mainly Qurʾan, narrations, early biographies, and later biographies (in this order) – yet they disagreed on how these sources should be interpreted. One issue raised by both instructors was whether Muslims should believe in the narrations relating to the Prophet's earliest miracles, e.g. stories that describe trees prostrating to the Prophet prior to him receiving revelation. Miracles acquired a central position in the discussions because they contradict science, and therefore challenge the legitimacy of traditional historiography. Instructor A promoted early miracles to make a case against purely empiricist conceptions of the world. Instructor B, on the other hand, encouraged students to dismiss early miracles if they did not make a fundamental contribution to the Prophet's message. Both instructors' approaches may be different reactions to wider debates on the "historical Muhammad", again a primarily academic concern.

Between the two instructors, there was more agreement that the lessons from the biography of the Prophet should inform contemporary life in some way. Incidentally, most contemporary contexts in which the *sīra* would be applied were related to activism in the public sphere, rather than personal life. I have called this approach of telling the *sīra* to extract lessons about contemporary Muslim activism, the "methodology of the Prophets", a theory of change inspired by the life of Muhammad, which Instructor B claimed followed the same stages of life of all previous Prophets.

At both institutes, the instructors employed the language of the natural sciences to talk about Islamic scholarship and discussed at length the issue of objectivity. Instructor B took the position that bias is indeed present in all fields of knowledge, but objectivity can be achieved by subjecting sources to rigorous scrutiny. Instructor A adopted a more unusual approach. He used words such as "science", "scientific standards" as well as "Islamic scientific" to refer to what is often translated as the "Islamic sciences", that is, traditional Islamic knowledge or *ʿulūm al-dīn*. As a result, the distinction between the modern

(natural and social) sciences and the Islamic traditional sciences was implicitly blurred. Contesting this distinction was particularly useful as Instructor A placed religion above science. Both instructors constructed narratives that contained some anti-empiricist positions. In particular, modern sciences were portrayed as a hegemonic paradigm that imposes itself upon spirituality.

In this chapter, I have addressed the first part of the research question, “Which interpretative practices are professed and/or employed in the formulation and development of political and civic discourse in the online classrooms?” and made some initial observations about how the epistemological positions adopted by the instructors are often formulated in response to wider academic and political debates. In the next few chapters, I will explore more in-depth the political implications of these methodological decisions.

Chapter 7: Making Muslims: *Daʿwa* and The Function of Islamic Education

Introduction

In this chapter, I show that the role given to education in both settings had an important civic and political function. In case of Institute A, Islamic education's primary function is spiritual enrichment and guidance as Muslims embody Islam in their everyday life in (mostly secular) societies. In the case of Institute B, the primary function of education is building the foundations of a Muslim society through Islamic education (i.e *daʿwa*).

At both institutes, Islamic education is therefore tightly connected to the idea of *daʿwa* towards Muslims (who Instructor B argued are often only Muslim "by name") and non-Muslims. Although *tarbiya* is mentioned by Instructor B, as I will describe shortly, the *function* given to education is explained in terms of *daʿwa,* rather than *tarbiya or taʿlīm*, which are some of the terms commonly associated with Islamic education in the literature, as I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

7.1 Education as a form of activism

In the previous chapters, I noted that in the lectures many discussions were shaped by the instructors' perception of Western academia. Echoing debates among Muslim reformers and scholars that have been going on since the 19th century, the instructors felt the need to defend and reclaim the status of Islamic scholarship vis-à-vis Western intellectual culture. Furthermore, the instructors attributed scientific qualities to Islamic premodern scholarship. Here, I discuss the political implications of these ideas by investigating in some detail how the

instructors define the function of education. I will do this first for Institute A and then for Institute B. The instructors' narratives suggest that education is given a strong civic and political role to play in the establishment of Muslims and their communities.

7.1.1 Institute A: Education, daʿwa and activism are one

Previously, I described that for Instructor A the *sīra* serves the function of casting away doubts about Islam and providing responses to anti-Islamic rhetoric. The kind of Islamic education offered therefore represents a form of self-preservation in a hostile environment. Instructor A also believed science and technology should be given their proper place below religion. He encouraged civic engagement in all sorts of social and civic activities, the main reason for engaging in these activitiesw was *daʿwa*.

Instructor A, for example, in the *sīra* lessons encouraged Muslims to excel in different fields of knowledge and to be innovative in all professions. The following passage was selected from the final parts of the Prophet's biography. In this part of the biography the instructor describes how the Prophet, having finally attained a position of power, starts to engage more intensely with emissaries from different parts of Arabia as the established leader of the Muslim community. Here, the instructor explains the meaning of the Prophet's political, and specifically diplomatic, work and transfers it to the world of culture, arts and entertainment:

> What does it mean for us? Just as a lesson. Being good in things like media, because media is something that our people in the west and around the whole world, we value media a lot … things like comedy even, things that communicate… arts … another thing that has been very successful with many people is rap music, now there's a lot of it that is not good, but there's some that has reached out to a lot of people, so certain forms of singing and music and spoken word, these are things that are valued in our society as well, by certain people. In terms of academia, people value that, we need academic contributions, so, so, excel, so Muslims, we need to excel and do the best at whatever we're doing, that'd be a *daʿwa* in itself. (Institute A)

The instructor makes a similar point when he encourages Muslims to learn about different cultures; for example, in the following passage he explains that intercultural knowledge is also instrumental to *daʿwa*:

> The lesson is, there is something in a culture where it is permissible to engage in … we as Muslims, we need to do good in it, so we need to encourage people if there a way you know that people find very respectable, Muslims living in a certain culture should learn the best of it, so that we can address others. Institute A

The permissibility of acquiring different skills seems to be linked to how useful those skills can be in terms of Islamic propagation. Media, arts, entertainment, culture and academia are seen as spaces and tools that can facilitate *daʿwa* (proselytisation/Islamic education) and *daʿwa* is, in turn, understood to hold an intrinsic value, to be good for society as a whole. In sociological terms, it is believed to add "social capital". However, the instructor encourages these different activities (spoken word, rap, academic work, etc.) only within the boundaries of what he considers Islamically "permissible" and "respectable".

Secular, democratic societies also place boundaries on the development of the arts and culture; all groups, to an extent, preserve the values they hold dear at any particular time. Think for example of 80s and 90s youth underground movement (illegal raves, squatting) characterized by alternative spiritualities and countercultural forms of entertainment and resistance (Partridge, 2006). Criminalization of some of these activities (like recreational drug use) appears merely to be rooted in custom, religious values and an attachment to traditions, more than in any evidence-based assessment of risks (Silverman, 2010). Deciding what forms of entertainment are "good" or "permissible" – what belongs or does not belong to the cultural capital of a society – is a hegemonic practice that seeks to exert authority by setting group boundaries and essentially asserting how much a culture can be changed.

Instructor A wants to show malleability and responsiveness to current popular culture while keeping these boundaries (i.e. the authority to establish what

Islam is and is not). Perhaps in response to narratives that portray Muslims as people who are “museumised”, “who don’t *make* culture” (Mamdani, 2002, p. 767 original emphasis), Instructor A wants to show that Muslims can innovate, lead and be creative. He gives examples to show that these cultural activities are also part of the Muslims life; he is normalising Muslims in response to narratives that exceptionalise them. The statements show a deeper appreciation for modern media culture and entertainment in general and the potential that the media have to spread messages fast. This, in turn, shows an awareness that communicating social issues creatively to change society plays an important social and political function.

Contributing to culture is, however, not considered an end in itself. *Making culture* is not driven by philanthropy (improving the human condition) or self-interest (gaining personal benefit) alone. Media, arts, entertainment, culture and academia are seen as opportunities for Muslims to promote a dynamic Muslim identity and relevant Islamic values. Throughout the classes, it was difficult to pinpoint which human activities did not constitute *daʿwa,* as it seems to permeate all forms of communication and civic engagement to the point that it equates with the very idea of *existing as a Muslim* in society. From writing a song to studying at university, any exemplar activity can be considered *daʿwa*. Education and civic engagement therefore are included in this broad definition of *daʿwa*. The advice given by Instructor A suggests that good behaviour by Muslims should be credited to Islam (not the individuals’ conscientiousness, for example). For the instructor, Muslims are always ambassadors of their faith, as they speak, work and engage in good deeds. Such good deeds counteract the bad publicity Islam gets in the media. The idea that Muslims’ positive contributions to society can put Islam in a good light contradicts the criticisms that Muslims put forward when the media highlights the religious identity of Muslims who commit crimes, especially in the context of media narratives about extremism (Abou El Fadl, 2003).

Instructor A avoids linking militancy or violence to Islam, he simply rejects this behaviour as “deviance” or “extremism”. This means that the “good” behaviour of Muslims should be read in terms of *Islam*, while the “bad” behaviour should not. The instructor emphasised that “bad” behaviour, such as violent extremism, distorts the message of Islam, even though a small minority of Muslims globally are inspired by Islam to commit those acts. By linking Islam to “good” behaviour, the instructor reinforces, most likely inadvertently, media narratives that link the behaviour of Muslims to Islam, rather than highlighting that behaviour is a result of the convergence of many sociocultural (and even political and economic) structures (Mamdani, 2002).

7.1.2 Institute B: “Education makes the Muslim society”

As shown in Chapter 6, the conversations taking place in the online classrooms at Institutes A and B often involve responding to, and at times challenging, key methodological debates in the academic study of history and religion. By looking closely at the content of the lessons, it becomes clear that the instructors are not only transmitting knowledge but developing safe places to discuss these methodological issues openly, away from those Western paradigms that feel imposed. Students ask about their doubts and the instructors affirm confidence in Islam as they locate the source of doubt in “other” paradigms and colonialism.

Both instructors engage in a dual pursuit. The first is purely theoretical, in the sense that they aim to revive “authentic” approaches to the study of Islam against Western(ised) paradigms (a form of decolonisation of education). The second is more practical because they aim to raise the confidence of their students to engage in society by applying these Islamic methodologies to modern contexts. These educational establishments therefore embody a dual commitment to learning *and* civic engagement. For example, at Institute B, one of the most common themes that emerged in the lectures was the idea that

education represents the initial step in building a *society* (the instructor uses "society" instead of "state" for reasons I will discuss later). This, he claimed, involves a process that requires breaking away from mainstream traditions and customs. Consider, for example, the following argument:

> Qurʾan says, mā kāna ʾibrāhīmu yahūdiyyan walā naṣrāniyyan, Jews and Christians make their religion as a culture and then they say Ibrahim has the same religion. Ibrahim didn't have these forms, Ibrahim had not in mind a culture, he was an ḥanif, (true monotheist) ḥanifīyah is a condition of ʾīmān (faith). If you don't have Ḥanifīyah, you can't have ʾīmān. He was a thinker; he didn't follow any culture. (Institute B)

Notice here that Instructor B did not provide a translation or a reference to the verse of the Qurʾan that he recited. Only after I transcribed the verse and entered the words in the original Arabic in the search engine of quran.com did I identify the passage as a part of verse 3:67. I wondered for a moment how many other online students would go to the trouble of translating or searching for a reference to this verse, as likely only students who have either a good command of the Arabic language or of the Qurʾan would be able to understand this quote instantly.

For those students who, like me, did not immediately know the translation of this verse (remember this course did not require any previous knowledge or specific skills), the instructor's words that followed – "Jews and Christians make their religion as a culture" – could be erroneously identified as the translation of the Qurʾanic passage. However, I found out later, as I was listening again to the lecture, the verse simply translates as, "Ibrahim was not a Jew or a Christian"[11]. Because the Qurʾanic verse in Arabic was integrated in the speech, a student

[11] The translation of the meanings of the full verse is "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolater." (Translation by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem)

had no time in class to look up the meaning of that verse and to distinguish the instructor's argument/interpretation from the Qurʾanic text. The instructor's opinion and the Qurʾan become one and the same. Instructor B then carried on with his argument with the following:

> That's actually what happened… Islam has been reduced to culture… and we are happy that there's one billion Muslims, but these one billion Muslims are actually the ones who follow culture, they don't follow religion, in that culture there are big aspects of religion as well, but it is not Islam when you don't have *ʾīmān (faith)*. (Institute B)

This passage suggests that there is a tension between (his definitions of) culture and religion, a theme that I also encountered at Institute A when the instructor asked his students to learn about other cultures as long as they do not contradict Islam. Here, Instructor B's position is that Ibrahim did not follow culture because he was a "thinker", so Islam is associated with intellectual reasoning ("thinking") and distanced from traditions and customs. He uses marriage as a practical example of how Muslims commonly call Islamic authorities (imams, scholars) for the formalities, while the celebrations are informed by cultural practices that are either "foreign" or "clashing" with Islam.

Instructor B's idea that the Prophets should be considered "thinkers" is remarkably in contradiction with his own claims, discussed earlier, that Prophets are not "intellectuals" who observe society to diagnose its problems; rather, Prophets simply receive revelation from God and obey orders. The instructor had also argued that modern Muslim intellectuals, under the influence of figures like Marx, were captivated by specific social problems which skewed their reading of Islamic texts.

The way in which Instructor B describes the difference between religion and culture also recalls the distinction drawn between "little tradition" (illiterate, experiential, observed at the local level, usually associated with the masses) and "great tradition" (erudite and literate, mastered by a few), which was adopted by anthropologists in the mid-20th century to describe "folk", local

traditions of Sufi saints and the "high" Islam of theologians and legal scholars (Varisco, 2005). Instructor B dismissed culture as unreflective "folklore" and assumes "Islam" comes from studying in-depth, and adhering to, classical texts. Earlier, the instructor had described "thinking" in negative terms because it was used in opposition to "obedience"; now he is portraying it in positive terms because "thinking" is in opposition to the notion of "culture", which is perceived to go against Islamic normative teachings. In short, for Instructor B, Islam requires people to think critically about society before being able to accept God's orders. Without this first conscious and rational act of submission, faith is just habit.

This recalls the trend of "rationalising" Islam that was discussed in Chapter 2, that is, understanding Islam as a conscious, educated choice made by people as they engage with the meanings of scriptures as opposed to, for example, accepting Islam as a custom, a taken-for-granted reality. Instructor B's overall message therefore is that religion must be acquired through education:

> You'll be happy that people read with their right hand, and they say *assalāmu ʿalaykum* [Peace be upon you] but this *assalāmu ʿalaykum* has no meaning … this is very important to understand and … the way to teach *shariʿa* is not to enforce it – educating the people, *tarbiya*, right *tarbiya* … that's how you teach and bring Islam to the society. (Institute B)

With this statement, the instructor is arguing that common words and phrases are merely symbolic of a certain identity, but lack substance if not combined with meaning, which can only be acquired through a good Islamic education (*tarbiya*). Religious symbols without this act of nurturing (*tarbiya*) of norms create many Muslims by name (who follow Islam as a habit) but only few Muslims who have true conviction. Islam is depicted as an intellectual faith that offers opportunities to reflect and question cultural practices and customs. This position is not too surprising in light of the argument that these Islamic institutes of learning aim to produce cultural and social change.

It does not appear here that the instructor's use of the term "culture" has anything to do with the word ʿ*urf* (custom), which is a source of law in Islamic legal narratives (Libson, 1997). Today, this Islamic concept is emphasised by some scholars to develop a theory of progressive Islam, using cultural relativism and broad ethical principle to advance ideas of gender justice, religious tolerance and human rights (Duderija, 2011; Moosa, 2003). Instructor B is instead likely accentuating the distinction between culture and religion for a combination of different, inter-related reasons. One may be the heightened sense of awareness of how faith moves across cultures and generations. In the case of many first-generation Muslims living in the West, it is about making sense of how they experience their religion "separately" from the culture of their parents from which their faith originated. That is why, it seems, many Muslims at times refer to a "pure", "cleaned-up" version of Islam free from the cultural baggage of their families, which leads to the creation of new identities, like a "European" or a "British" Islam (Easat-Daas, 2017). Separating culture and religion can also be a way of highlighting one's "Islamic identity", perhaps as a form of resistance, to counter mainstream Western(ised) secular culture. Another reason for highlighting the distinction between culture and religion may be that religion in secular contexts is increasingly lived as a private, "optional" activity that is separate from other aspects of life (work, education, politics, etc.), therefore causing anxiety about loss of religiosity and/or collective identity. Most importantly, some Muslims may make the case that religion can be a force for good; it can offer paradigms and perspectives that can address the problems of modern society. For Instructor B, therefore, education serves a nation-building function:

In our time, most Muslim movements that have started, they did this mistake, some have started with the Medinan life, without having a proper foundation, without having believers. They want an Islamic State and Islamic power; *assuming that everybody else is Muslim.* This is not the right way; think really that we have to build a Muslim community. *Muslims don't exist, we have to make them*, and then the Islamic society." (Institute B - concluding remarks about the life of the Prophet)

The instructor here argues that education is instrumental in the creation of a society. He criticises militant Muslims who are preoccupied with the idea of establishing "Islamic law" or an "Islamic State", not because longing for the establishment of an Islamic society with its own norms and laws is inherently wrong, but because the imposition of laws does not foster faith on its own. Laws, he claims, are established organically. The instructor explains that Islamic movements want power but lack the groundwork to gain political leadership. For this reason, he wants Muslims to engage in the public sphere as *educators* working to establish a *society*, not as *political activists* trying to establish a *state*. This argument sits within Instructor B's theory of change that I discussed earlier, which is expressed in three stages (*daʿwa*/education, *hijra*/emigration and *jihad*/physical effort). The following passage immediately follows the previous statement:

> … The *Tablighi Jamaat* had started with the right intention, in Meccan life, (…) but they never moved so the problem happened … The Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* didn't come to keep people in Meccan life … You have to move from one step to the other step until you reach… and you build a society, don't start with the last step, start with the first one – but don't stop there – and don't start with the last one as you won't succeed. (Institute B – concluding remarks about the life of the Prophet

The last two excerpts combined (around one minute of video recording condensed for reasons of space) show how the instructor draws boundaries between groups and "types" of Muslims in his lectures. In the first passage, he uses a third person plural (them) to describe the ideal Muslim type (the "Muslims who don't exist") and a first-person plural (us) to refer to those ordinary Muslims who should engage in Islamic activism/education (and who, in the process, will "make the Muslims and the Islamic society"). There is also a third person plural, which is Islamic movements (the *Tablighi Jamaat*, but elsewhere he also mentions the *Jamaat-e-Islami*) on whom he places responsibility for the failure to implement the prophets' theory of change (the

methodology of the prophets). Again, he switches to the second person, an imperative tone that calls to action ("you have to move from one step to the other"), namely, implementing the three steps of the *methodology of the prophets* in the right order.

According to Instructor B, Muslims are so "weak" that a plan to implement the *methodology of the Prophets* must begin from the foundations of society: educational institutions. To explain this point, perhaps surprisingly, the instructor turns his attention to the origins of power in Western societies. Even though the instructor does not see the West as a role model in terms of piety, he sees the source of political and economic power in Western education, in particular academia:

> These Islamic movements think that once you get the power you can make laws and make the society powerful … They don't understand really that the west doesn't make a society from the state, exactly the western society comes from ideologies, colleges, schools ... education, and then after that the state comes to help them. Western states did not create western people, western people have been made from a long struggle of education. (Institute B)

Western societies, according to Instructor B, have something that Muslims should aspire to have, which is "power". Power originates in education, Instructor B argues, and cannot be gained by imposing laws from the top-down. His earlier critique of Western academia (which I explored in Chapter 6) culminates in a discourse that places the West (perhaps paradoxically) as a historically successful political model. In these statements, Instructor B does not discuss whether particular types of education are likely to make one society more successful than another or which type of education system may affect political structures, especially in the long term. Crucially, the instructor also does not define what "power" means nor does he outline any indicators that can describe what a powerful society looks like and measure the magnitude of power in any given society.

Instructor B neither discusses the *type* of education that is more likely to generate political "power", nor the nature of power that he wishes Muslims to

acquire. As will be discussed in Chapter 9, Instructor B does not provide details of the type of government that would be fit for this ideal Muslim society. Perhaps his argument is simply that Islamic education will lead to the formation of an "Islamic society" in the same way that Western academia has contributed to the formation of Western society, or that Islamic education will lead to the same social and political outcomes of liberal-secular education. One basic problem with these arguments is that there are many factors that influence the formation of political power. Academia is also influenced by outside economic, social and political forces. It freed itself from traditional religious authority, whilst at the same time maintaining and reinforcing traditions. In short, society changes organically, often contradictorily, within and across institutions. European political systems are rooted in bureaucratic institutions, titles and rituals that derive from disparate sources, such as monarchic and feudal traditions, capitalist models of economic growth, colonial structures, democratic ideals, technological advances, struggle for equality and self-determination. All these elements form the whole "power complex", even though they coexist in contradiction with each other.

While Instructor B's statements lack detail and definitions, the instructor makes education a priority over law-making and state institutions. The emphasis on education is a reaction to what he claims is the disproportionate attention that has been given to the acquisition of political power and the application of "Islamic law" by Islamist movements, a trend observed in contemporary Islamic discourse for the last twenty years (Moosa, 2003). This is particularly interesting because the instructor operates within a curriculum that puts the study of Islamic jurisprudence (and its sources, *ḥadīth*) at the centre of the curriculum. Instructor B points out:

Ninety per cent of the *shariʿa* is just 'norms', being a normal human being, being kind, giving to charity … but we start from the *hudud* [punishments under Islamic law] … If you want to bring *shariʿa* you need to build norms first, laws are only to protect the norms. Certainly, we never

accept any mixing between man-made law and divine law, but the problem is that Mawdudi and Qutb emphasize *hudud* instead of norms. (Institute B)

The instructor reiterates again and again that education is the foundation of the citizen; it is where societal norms are internalised before (and to prevent) the recourse to criminal law and the involvement of authorities. There are therefore few laws, and they are of secondary importance in society. For the instructor, Islamist political movements have focused on the need to establish political institutions instead of working on developing culture, piety, education and society. His position is that Muslims should be focusing on developing their thinkers, their universities and their educational institutions.

In his comments, Instructor B often refers to Islamist movements as simply "Muslim" or "Islamic" movements, even those that engage in militant activities. He makes a reference to ISIS/daesh for example, which at the time (2016) was in the news for taking Yazidi women as captives in Iraq and Syria. Instructor B critiqued these Islamist movements without dismissing, denouncing or labelling them as "extremist" or "deviant" as Instructor A did. Instructor B's critique was *from within* and reinforced his main argument that Muslims as a global community are essentially adrift in the world:

We don't have any plans. The point really is all Muslims, whether they are fighting or whether they are sitting like us, none of us have plan, and Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā* wants people to make a plan and to move in that direction. (Institute B)

Contrary to Instructor B's narrative, Instructor A labelled Muslims who promote or engage in fighting in the name of Islam as either "deviant" and "extremist". This helped Instructor A distance himself from Islamism; there is no ambiguity at Institute A that Islamists are outsiders, even though, as I have shown, there are no dramatic differences between Institutea A and B. For the most part, they share common concerns and perspectives. Instructor B is unapologetic in his stance that all Muslims should be part of the process of building a Muslim/Islamic society.

Education is a formal process that helps society reproduce what is important to the dominant groups in that particular society. The two online classes engage instead in a sort of counter-cultural effort. They seek to reproduce certain ideas that are important in their own community (e.g. pre-modern Muslim scholarship), while drawing boundaries between social groups (scholars/laypeople, Islamic education/academia) and reproducing some shared values (e.g. being hardworking, being professional). As a result, they set themselves the task of reorganising knowledge hierarchies and aiding the formation of Muslim citizens and eventually of an Islamic society.

The function of Islamic education is, therefore, to build society, a de facto form of activism instrumental to the process of establishing a righteous Muslim society. While Islamic education is portrayed as a catalyst for social transformation, the course content at both institutes is overwhelmingly conservative in its mission to assert the authority of traditional scholarship. As I have shown so far, there is little space, if at all, dedicated to unpacking key concepts, ideas and definitions because the tone and content of the classes is often apologetic and defensive to protect faith and belief. The lessons at Institutes A and B suggest that these Islamic online institutes are providing a response to high-profile and more contentious forms of political Islam (and the media portrayal of it). These institutes offer a structured curriculum as a point of reference for Muslims, in response to the proliferation of Islamic discussion and activism online.

The fact that Islamic education is framed as being instrumental to the formation of an Islamic society sheds more light on the reason why these institutes choose to operate online. The internet enables them to compete globally, alongside other Islamic institutes and personalities. Being by its very nature transnational, the internet provides significant opportunities to reach a great number of people across the world, at a relatively low cost. As Bunt puts it, the "Islamic web sphere" is a competitive "marketplace of knowledge transmission and production" where Muslim organisations and individuals compete for

attention and influence (Bunt, 2018, p. 84). “Those who are most web-literate”, Bunt explains, “in utilising social networking for disseminating Islamic content are best able to present their worldviews” (2018, p. 118).

7.2 Exploring the link between criticality and civic skills

Education plays an important role in the development of citizenship and civic consciousness. However, how different experiences of education influence this process is not entirely clear (Olson & Worsham, 2012). Critical thinking – or “criticality” – is a skill that is generally thought to contribute to the formation of “virtue” and a “moral compass” (Johnston et al., 2011). Critical thinking is also believed to be a “crucial element in the competence citizens need to participate in a plural and democratic society.” (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004, p. 360). During this research, I often wondered what “criticality” actually means, how many types of criticality exist and whether different types of criticality can lead to different understandings of citizenship and conceptions of an “ideal society”. A useful way to define criticality is the capacity of “thinking critically about formal knowledge” (critical thinking), “understanding oneself critically” (critical self-reflection) and “acting critically in the world” (critical action) (Johnston et al., 2011). This definition of critical thinking comes from a democratic understanding of the citizen. Ideally, in this view, education should advance these three forms of criticality simultaneously. As well as preparing students for employment, education should provide students the tools to understand society and make informed judgments as citizens within the political process.

The approach to criticality advocated by Instructor B appears instead to be influenced broadly by the classical Islamic tradition. This tradition includes subjects such as rhetoric and logic, which in turn, derive from classical philosophy (Walbridge, 2010). This approach to criticality consists of specialised training focused on correct reasoning procedures. It is specifically

geared towards identifying internal contradictions and fallacies in the texts. In a podcast, the UK-based scholar mentioned earlier, Haitham al-Haddad talked about this type of traditional education. He explained that students in traditional seminaries spend years "studying tiny issues" and as a result:

> Your mind will not understand big issues and your mind will feel that this is the most important thing in life and you might become agitated when you see someone making a mistake in *wudhu* [ablution] but you might not [become] agitated when you see a tyrant doing injustice against your community. (5Pillars, 2020)

These text-centred, rhetoric-focused approaches to criticality have been criticised for prioritising procedures over substance and for turning "good thinkers in mechanical logic-choppers" (Johnston et al, 2011, p. 25 quoting Walters, 2014). Furthermore, too much focus on the close reading of the texts (or other narrow analysis of data) in any discipline can give a false sense of "neutrality" or fail to address wider political or moral questions (Johnston et al., 2011). A similar sentiment exists about traditional Islamic studies, for example, that it is "oblivious" to wider social contexts and therefore does not prepare faith leaders to today's challenges (Shah, 2019). Al-Haddad's comment above shows that there is a debate within social conservative strands of Islam, which generally focus on laws and norms, on how to develop an approach to the texts that engages with contemporary political and social issues, even while remaining loyal to normativity. Al-Haddad wants Islamic schools and seminaries to teach traditional Islamic traditions and methods (subject specific-critical thinking) in a way that equips students with the skills to engage with society (critical action).

In earlier chapters, I argued that Instructor B's reliance on technical concerns to answer contentious issues prevented reflections on wider ethical questions. Ethics lie at the crossroads between the three types of criticality above mentioned. The question is whether it is possible to achieve "true" criticality if we are not willing to question ourselves or the foundations of the religious texts that we hold dear. Instructor B's approach derives from a tradition of Islamic

higher education, like the *dār al-ʿulūm* typical of the Indian subcontinent (Moosa, 2015). The regulation of reasoning and debate remains to this day the domain of a class of specialised experts (*ʿulamaʾ*). Instructor B argues that with the ability to engage in specialised forms of reasoning comes a civic responsibility:

> If a person says something without proper reasoning then the hurt will be very limited, but if a professor at Oxford does the same thing, is it the same? It's much more hurtful because you're in a seat which is respected and which is going to be followed by the people. (Institute B)

It appears therefore that Instructor B gives a position of importance to experts (not just Islamic scholars, as he gives the example of an Oxford University professor). Experts hold a position of trust and responsibility towards society. They are not only knowledgeable in their field, but they are also "public intellectuals" whose opinions can carry more weight than ordinary people's. It is because of their responsibility towards the public that the instructor thinks "thinking" should be regulated:

> Make you argument properly, be professional … you want full freedom to do whatever you like, no, there's no full freedom, no, you have to think properly according to rules, but these people don't want to be regulated they want to think how they want, they think *ijtihād*, is independent thinking, it's not independent thinking, you have to think within boundaries. (Institute B)

The instructor here is grappling with the issue of who can do the interpretation, what role these interpreters should have in society and how much their thinking should be regulated (bound) by specific rules. Instructor B's preoccupation with regulating the thinking of ordinary people epitomises the "tension between scriptural egalitarianism", in particular, the desire to educate all Muslims to engage with Islam's meanings – and "the assertion of interpretive control" of traditional scholarship. This is correlated with the reality that the interpretation of texts requires specialised competences, which can be acquired over time by the relatively few who commit to a specialised field of study (Brown, 2015, p. 121).

The focus on the public responsibility of those who have technical expertise, however, overlooks some important power dynamics that govern knowledge production and dissemination. Outside the field of Islam, too, it is generally the case that each discipline has specific rules and procedures that regulate the production of knowledge. For example, a statistician must follow the rules established in their field to conduct research. A physicist must follow agreed procedures to conduct experiments. However, in addition to technical know-how, wider cultural, political and economic factors influence the research agenda within these disciplines (and universities more broadly). There are also those who innovate by questioning and breaking the rules. In many disciplines, the authority of experts is often confined within their fields (and its specific applications) and acknowledged more widely only when experts are consulted by the media or given advisory roles in public contexts. Experts have usually no political decision-making powers per se and often have limited influence on public opinion.

For example, scientists might well explore the possibility of humans settling on Mars, but wider social and political processes will establish whether such a venture is worth pursuing (and likely to attract funding). A geneticist may make significant discoveries in the field of human gene editing, but ultimately, it is society that establishes the ethical, medical, commercial and legal boundaries of this practice. In the same way, religious scholars may conclude that the sacred sources unambiguously point to the prohibition of homosexual acts or sexual relations outside marriage, yet wider cultural and political dynamics ultimately establish what behaviours are tolerated in society. In short, experts have the civic duty to offer accurate information based on their technical knowledge, but broader dynamics define the salience of a particular field of study and whether people will accept or adhere to its findings. When a particular issue within a field of knowledge becomes salient, collective reasoning moves to the public realm. Instructor B's idea that scholars or experts should follow the rules of their discipline is clearly sensible, but the idea that the thinking of the

wider public ("people") should be "regulated" or strictly adhere to subject-specific (technical) rules is unrealistic. Ethical and cultural considerations are likely to influence the development of disciplines and new ideas and discoveries within disciplines can considerably influence society, depending on whether these inventions and ideas "catch on".

Instructor B does not specify who exactly the "people" whose freedom of thinking should be limited are. These details are often absent in classroom discussions at Institute B. However, the instructor's concerns with "regulated thinking" and the role of informed, expert opinion is a particularly prominent issue in today's society. Media experts and policymakers increasingly worry about the proliferation of inaccurate information on social media. The spread of misinformation is one negative consequence of a much more significant shift towards the democratisation of knowledge through for example citizens' science, grassroots journalism, participatory forms of context creation (such as open sourcing, wikis etc.), digital commons, intellectual piracy and so on. These are all different responses to the commodification and marketisation of knowledge.

The instructors of the two Islamic e-learning institutes are in turn addressing, often implicitly, this wider debate over the democratisation of knowledge and the role of expertise in networked, media-centred societies. Some Muslims, such as Islamic feminists, are concerned about the historical monopoly of (the transmission and interpretation of) knowledge by male scholarly elites and perhaps welcome the disruption of traditional authority through participatory and egalitarian engagement to the sources. Other Muslims, such as traditionalists, emphasise the greater wisdom of premodern scholars and thus reaffirm social conservative norms and values in contemporary contexts. Instructor A was especially vocal in his condemnation of autodidacticism. Lack of traditional Islamic training can be used strategically to delegitimise Muslims. This happened for example in 2017, when leaked documents showed ISIS fighters had with them introductory books about Islam, such as *Islam for*

dummies, supposedly demonstrating that these Muslims had a “poor grasp” of their religion (Batrawy, Dodds, & Hinnant, 2016). Some narratives at the time also argued that these young Muslims embraced militancy because they learned Islam online, instead of connecting with mainstream scholars. At the same time, a condemnation of autodidacticism means delegitimising all those Muslims who are reinterpreting the scriptures and disrupting traditional structures with progressive, secular, liberal, decolonial and/or “simply” critical readings of Islam.

The purpose of the two e-learning institutes is to provide Islamic education through structured learning because of the tendency toward autodidacticism from these two “types” of Muslim activists (the militant and the “critical”). In the classes, knowledge is consistently linked to activism (critical action). Instructor B, for example, would explain:

> The way it is happening now in the Middle East, it is very bad, they *don’t learn properly*. These people who do jihad, they do it without preparation. (Institute B, my emphasis)

This idea that Muslims do not receive adequate Islamic education serves to delegitimise the interpretative and political choices of these two Muslim groups. The connection between expertise and activism is often not assumed in other contexts, for example, political candidates who run for elections are not expected to be experts, environmental activists are not generally expected to be ecologists or climate scientists, Christians pro-life activists are not generally required to be doctors or scholars of Christianity.

It is hard to dismiss the knowledge that is required to develop informed opinions especially in today’s society where many complex social, economic, technological and scientific issues intersect. This is even before we attempt to factor “Islam” on any particular issue. This is why Fazlur Rahman (1982) developed a “double movement” theory to deal with the need to integrate contemporary and traditional knowledge. This double movement theory

involves a two-step process to reach "sound" Islamic opinions. The first step requires the development of an understanding of the context of revelation and ensuring that the Qurʾan is considered holistically – in its entirety – so that any conclusions are in line with the overarching ethical principles of Islam (Panjwani, 2012). The second step seeks to inform these Islamic principles and values with current knowledge about contemporary issues, so the interpretative process requires necessarily different sets of experts depending on the subject matter being explored (Rahman, 1982).

The Islamic scholars and instructors I came across in my study did not embrace modern disciplines as openly, nor were they as ready to fully integrate modern knowledge into their thinking. Their position was ambivalent. They described studying in the modern, Western(ised) academy as a worthwhile but risky venture that could corrupt faith. They argued that Islamic scholars should keep up to date with contemporary society to formulate informed Islamic opinions, yet it is unclear how far they would be willing to change their Islamic positions according to modern science (as I reported, their views on modern sciences were often negative). These scholars understand the benefits of secular education but are worried about Muslims losing their faith in the process. In Haitham's words if a Muslim "is too much into debates with non-Muslims or with the academics slowly, slowly the *shayṭān* (devil) will penetrate his mind" and compromise his faith (5Pillars, 2020). I will return to this point in Chapter 9, when I explain the notion of "weakness" associated with the need for a strong Muslim ruler.

7.3 Final observations: Islamic, critical and decolonial education

Education plays the important role of cultivating the skills and general knowledge that can help people make moral and political decisions. Critical

theories of education seek to develop a type of criticality that identifies the causes of social and economic injustices, challenges the mechanisms that reproduce these injustices and cultivates group consciousness in order to facilitate systemic change (Nieto, 2018). From this tradition is born a decolonial critique that identifies the foundations of today's wealth and social inequalities in European settlement and expansion around the world. Given their preoccupation with European colonialism and the revival of Islamic education, it may intuitively seem that the Islamic education promoted by Instructors A and B could also be defined as a type of decolonial education. So, to understand some key characteristics of the education I observed, it is useful to compare it with decolonial and critical theories of education.

Decolonial scholars advocate "epistemic delinking". "Delinking" means decentralising the Western monopoly over knowledge production and distribution, which operates on the basis of the supposed intellectual and technological superiority/universality of European modernity/rationality. Delinking means challenging historical (and yet still current) colonial power structures to effectively ensure that political, religious, intellectual and economic paradigms and agendas are not dictated by Western institutions, intellectuals, policy-makers, activists and commentators (Mignolo, 2011).

Grosfoguel (2007) defines colonial modernity/rationality as a "fundamentalism" because it shares with other fundamentalisms the idea that there is "one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve Truth and Universality" (p. 212). The thought of Descartes is used as the epitome of this Eurocentric view. The "I" in "I think therefore I am", it is argued, represents the point of view of white European men (not women). The resulting knowledge (re)produces hierarchies that justify the marginalisation of other paradigms and the subjugation of the "other" (Grosfoguel 2007). Descartes' formula is transformed into "I am *where* I think" (Mignolo, 1999) to acknowledge the geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge:

> Historically, this has allowed Western man (the gendered term is intentionally used here) to represent his knowledge as the only one capable of achieving a universal consciousness, and to dismiss non-Western knowledge as particularistic and, thus, unable to achieve universality. (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 214)

Decolonial education therefore seeks to confront the "colonial power matrix" in an effort to revive and recover all the possible alternatives, that is, all those indigenous epistemic, ethical and political projects that have resisted colonisation for hundreds of years from the margins. This position is strikingly similar to Instructor A's point that there has been "a concerted effort from the part of European colonialists to divorce the *umma* from their scholars" (see Chapter 6).

The instructors' emphasis on defining traditional scholarship as scientific, rigorous and objective can be interpreted as an attempt to decolonise Muslim scholarship, which has been appropriated and peripheralized or stereotyped by European institutional actors for centuries. One of the key differences between decolonial theory/practice and the Islamic education I observed online, is that the instructors criticise Western education for lacking faith and spirituality and for destabilising Muslim societies, yet they simultaneously look up to Western society's dominance on the world stage. They want Islamic scholarship to achieve the status of academia, yet there appears to be very little critique of the institutional structures, the privileges, and inequalities on which it is rooted – the focus of their critique is mainly methodological (empiricism, subjectivism, agnosticism and so forth). They want to advance their epistemic position within the system and add religious purpose to it, but without necessarily challenging the social structures on which the system is based.

Decolonial scholarship seeks instead to facilitate critical dialogue with all traditions. It seeks to facilitate the critical engagement with different knowledge systems on equal terms, something that under colonial modernity/rationality is structurally impossible to do. Decolonial scholarship does not tend to reject liberal and progressive elements of Western education outright. However,

rather than treating it as universally applicable, they regard Western modernity/criticality as particular to a time and space – because all knowledge systems inevitably are. Moreover, decolonial practices aim to achieve equity, i.e. for Western paradigms to be critically assessed alongside all the other options that exist, *on equal terms and in the spirit of autonomy and self-determination*. In one word, they advocate a search for “pluriversality” (Grosfoguel, 2007). Pluriversality is different to “pluralism” or “multiculturalism” because these latter ideas are based upon the Western model, implicitly assuming its superiority, and thus fail to systematically address the colonial, racist roots of today’s social and economic injustices.

Similarly to decolonial thought, online traditional Islamic education also seeks to resist Western colonial paradigms by recovering and re-centring “indigenous” Islamic traditions. But there are some key differences. Framing “indigeneity” from an “Islamic perspective” is challenging partly because Muslim scholarship and religious practices are extremely diverse, having spanned across vast territories for hundreds of years. Furthermore, historically, Muslim intellectual and spiritual authorities were often numerous, often independent and decentralised. As I will explore more in Chapter 8, Instructors A and B seemed to lean towards universal truths, with some elements of pluralism informed by a Western understanding of citizenship, yet explicitly framed in religious terms. In the lectures observed, normative Islam vis-à-vis its engagement with Western paradigms was prioritised over the critical engagement with other Indigenous worldviews and movements. As I will show, the instructors’ definition of citizenship is flexible as long as it serves the purpose of advancing the religious education of Muslims and the advancement of the Muslim community.

“Islamic education” was commonly referred by both instructors as *daʿwa*, instead of other common terms such as *tarbiya* (nurturing) or *taʿlīm* (instruction) (Davids & Waghid, 2014). The notion of *daʿwa* is linked to the idea of propagation and by association – in some historical contexts – also to the idea

of Islamic expansion. The prevalence of the term *daʿwa* to describe the education of Muslims *about* Islam assumes that the work of propagation of the faith needs to happen within the community first, "*to make Muslims"*. The instructors' comments suggest that the development of the community through education (both Islamic and secular) can impact positively on the preservation and expansion of Islam. However, the lack of openness towards critical thinking and methodological pluralism (within as well as outside of Islam) makes the type of Islamic education I observed more polemical and defensive in nature than explorative.

In this chapter, I have shown that the instructors assign a civic function to education, that is, they see education as a tool to develop the social capital and political power of the Muslim community. I have also discussed the way their understanding of criticality reflects their civic and political concerns over the kind of relationship Muslims should have with their faith in westernised, mostly secular environments. The approach to critical thinking is a key concern because it determines the interpretative choices that Muslims make to represent and embody Islam (the texts) in contemporary society. Criticality determines what Islam looks like to the outside world as it is embodied by Muslims and the community. In Chapter 8, I discuss more in detail how the instructors conceptualise activism and explore the implications of defining *daʿwa*/education as essentially a form of civic engagement.

Chapter 8: Implications for Civil Rights, Pluralism and Social Change

In this chapter, I explore how activism is defined and discussed in the *sīra* classes at Institutes A and B. I use three examples to illustrate the forms of activism that are deemed to be "Islamic". The first example analyses references to civil rights in the online classes and particularly what Instructor A said about Muslims forming alliances and collaborations with other civil rights movements in secular, pluralistic contexts. The second example describes Instructor B's definition of activism. Instructor B dismisses some forms of activism, such as protests, as "Western" and argues that the Western understanding of activism should be replaced with the Islamic notions of *daʿwa* (Islamic education and propagation) and *ʿibāda* (act of submission through ritual worship, service). However, Instructor B, like Instructor A, also argues that Muslims should take advantage of the opportunities present in secular societies to advance Islamic causes and strengthen Muslim communities. Finally, the third example discusses the efforts of Instructor A to synthetise two positions: one that frames Islam as a superior truth that overrules all other religious truths (despite guaranteeing some level of tolerance) and religious pluralism.

8.1 Dimensions of justice: between theology, piety and rights

Both Instructors A and B employed language from contemporary social and political contexts to make sense of the life of Prophet Muhammad. Instructor B often referred to Islamic political movements of the late 19th and 20th century, while Instructor A used modern sociological concepts and discussed the implications of being involved with contemporary social justice movements. Instructor A was particularly concerned with combating injustices, standing up

for the oppressed and yearning for economic and social equality. He talked about these issues using language and references rooted in modern history and projected these values on the prophetic biography. Instructor A often mentioned justice and rights in economic and legal terms. Consider the following three examples:

> Islam is a religion that is based on justice and fairness and upholding rights. (Institute A, In the context of the Constitution of Medina)

> Muslims belong to the people who try to perfect their good qualities and who stand up for the weak and the poor and stand up for justice. (Institute A, The Pact of Justice at the house of Abdullah ibn Judan)

> Justice means equal access to a judge or to the courts or to the people who decide and it means ... justice means standing up for those who are wronged in our societies which is a big lesson for us, we need to look at those people who are wronged in our societies, people who have no rights or no status… (Institute A, The Pact of Justice at the house of Abdullah ibn Judan)

The last two excerpts were extracted from an incident (known as “The Pact of Justice at the house of Abdullah ibn Judan”) that occurred before Prophet Muhammad received revelation. Later in his prophetic career, the instructor narrated, the Prophet remembered this incident with admiration.

The concepts of equity and justice are not alien to premodern Islam (Rosenthal 1962: 50), yet their meanings differ considerably from the modern understanding of these ideas. In premodern Muslim traditions, egalitarianism and justice coexist with the idea of owning, selling and freeing slaves, for example. Despite the continued existence of forced labour in the contemporary world, the *idea* that a human being may be owned by another and set free at will is not compatible with many contemporary definitions of justice and equity. Similarly, the concept of “human rights” exists in classical Islamic law in different forms. However, there is much speculation on the compatibility of these classical concepts (and potential contribution) to contemporary human rights law (Mol 2019).

Instructor A's focus on rights is also interesting when we take into account the view that Islam is a religion that favours the rights of the community, (which means individuals' duties towards the community) over rights of the individual (Evans, 2011). Sachedina goes as far as to say, "in Muslim culture the emphasis is on responsibilities without any mention of rights" (2009, p. 12). Instructor A interprets the boycott of the first Muslims by the Qurayshi ruling tribe in the early prophetic life of Muhammad in terms of standing up against any form of discrimination towards groups of people in society, be it because of nationalism, racism, or any other form of tribalism:

If we see any sort of xenophobia or discrimination or hatred towards another group of people, we have to stand up for that group of people. (Institute A, Quraysh boycott the Muslims)

This theme emerges recurrently throughout the lessons. Instructor A, for example, used the same story, specifically the way Muslims networked with the people of Mecca to lobby against the boycott, to extract specific lessons about civic and political engagement in today's age:

This is a very important lesson for those who are for peace and justice … It shows you the power of lobbying and organizing for change, because you never know the networks that you make within wider society, whether it's interfaith networks, or different social movements … it tells us as Muslims we need to … think of creative ways and arts to express causes for social justice. (Institute A)

Here, the way Instructor A's interpretation of the incident of the boycott results in an understanding of activism that resonates with how social movements operate today. His way of utilising the *sīra* – intentionally or unintentionally – partly normalises contemporary social justice movements.

The excerpt above also shows that, as Asfaruddin explains, Muslims today emphasise "the message of social justice and gender egalitarianism that they discover in Muhammad's preaching" because these ideas have "resonance in our contemporary world" (2013: 30). Notice here the words used by the instructor, such as "activism for peace", "networks", "social movements",

“creativity”, and the “arts”, have a distinctively contemporary, at times perhaps progressive, nuances. Even in the latter stages of the Prophet’s life, when the Prophet was largely victorious, Instructor A insists on the theme of fighting against oppression:

So, there was an active effort to end oppression in the Arabian Peninsula and this happened in the last two years of the Prophet’s *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* life. Institute A

In this passage, ending oppression is used to justify the last offensive campaigns of the Prophet’s career, even though at that point of the biography it becomes unclear which type of oppression the instructor is referring to. Some authors suggest, for example, that those final campaigns were attempts to solidify political power and conquer new lands. It is in this same period that the Prophet sends letters to rulers beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Black (2011) adopts a completely different interpretation of this phase. Drawing on Patricia Crone’s work, he writes:

Fighting unbelievers and killing idolaters, even if they were not the aggressors, were religious duties. Islam more than any other world religion made a virtue of war, although it also regulated it. (Black 2011: 12)

According to the instructor’s interpretation of this part of the biography, the Prophet’s campaign represented an effort to fight oppression of the most vulnerable and, by preserving Islam, to leave behind a more just society. As shown in Chapter 5, for Instructor A, military stories can offer generic lessons unrelated to war and violence.

In all of Instructor A’s classes, I identified three dimensions of justice: (i) theological justice, the effort to propagate the “one true faith”; (ii) moral justice, the effort to regulate rules of conduct and foster piety; (iii) social justice, the effort to uphold political, civil and human rights (standing up for the rights of oppressed groups in society). The combination of these positions reflects the distinction made in Islamic legal theory between divine rights and rights related to public interest. Divine rights correspond to Instructor A’s desire for

“theological justice”, like upholding God’s rights in relation to the duty of people to believe in God and conduct acts of worship. The rights related to public interest refer to those rights that maintain social order and fulfil basic human necessities (Mol, 2019), which in Instructor A’s narrative, correspond to civil and social rights.

Instructor A never addressed the potential tensions between these three distinct understandings of justice, even just for the purpose of resolving the tension. The only time this conflict is articulated explicitly is in the following answer to a student’s question concerning the appropriateness of engaging in some types of activism:

> The problem of getting involved with activism is … are we cooperating in something that is ultimately good or are we compromising our faith? We talked about working with Marxists, for example, or working with gay groups, so you may find a great ally in these groups but are we aware of the other agendas that they are trying to push? (Institute A)

Here, there seems to be an underlying understanding that Muslims and various left-wing and civil rights groups share similar concerns on an array of social issues (for example anti-war, social welfare, anti-racist causes are all mentioned in the *sīra* classes at Institute A). However, the instructor is explaining here that, despite the common causes, his overall vision of social justice is different.

The concern with appropriate forms of activism and alliances is not unique to Instructor A. In a short book titled *Sacred Activism*, Walid is concerned with giving “guidance to Muslims in the West regarding engagement in social justice activism” (2018, p. 25). In this book, the author dedicates two chapters to relationships between Muslim and secular social justice movements. In one chapter, he draws the distinction between coalitions and alliances, the former (allyship) being reserved only to building connections among Muslims. The latter was a conditional “partnership” on specific issues or campaigns with other social justice movements, due to being “in opposition to each other on other

matters" (p. 54). Walid argues that the crux of the matter is the absence of shared morals, "there is no absolute allyship", he argues, on matters that "violate Islamic morality and ethics" (ibid, p. 56).

Walid also dedicates an entire chapter to engagement with LGBTQ+ rights groups. This is, he explains, for two reasons. First, LGBTQ+ groups have been "most vocal" in supporting Muslim communities against hate and discrimination and, second, this, as a result, has changed how many Muslims view homosexuality. Walid's position towards LGBTQ+ rights is similar to Instructor A's in that they both consider it "impermissible" to act upon same sex desire. Such preoccupation with LGBTQ+ rights suggests some anxiety about a cultural shift that is perhaps inevitably happening among Muslims, especially younger generations who are raised in societies where acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities has increased dramatically in the last few decades. Walid argues that it is important to re-centre activism on faith and engage with groups "within the confines of our agreed upon principles of Islam", that is seeking to "please Allah by enjoining good and forbidding evil" (p. 62). For Instructor A, this seems to be, of all possible issues, the single most important point of contention that differentiates an Islamic view of justice from a liberal or progressive one.

8.2 Social change via emulation of the Prophet (or a passive conception of history) vs. contemporary activism

Instructor B was not as concerned with the potential negative impact of creating alliances with other groups; he did not emphasise social justice, standing up for the oppressed or equity. He did talk about justice in terms of equity but did not give this definition an entirely positive connotation; in fact, at times he was critical of contemporary understandings of justice and equality. Instructor B was more concerned with how justice should be understood as part of his theory of

social change, the three-step *methodology of the Prophets* that he advocated, which has been discussed in previous chapters:

The starting point must always be *daʿwa*. Then the time comes when you have to do *hijra* … *hijra* doesn't have to be physically, that you have to leave the people … sometimes mentally, you leave whatever custom or tradition [interrupts] then the third stage, *jihad*, making [an] effort to make their own society. (Institute B)

Daʿwa is used here, as mentioned earlier, in terms of an effort to educate the Muslim community (rather than divulging the faith to non-Muslims). *Daʿwa* involves taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by secular, free societies, e.g. the ease with which Muslims can set up their own educational centres and relative freedom to set their own curriculum. *Hijra*, is an intermediate stage where Muslims, as a result of being more educated and religiously motivated, become less involved in aspects of secular society perceived to contradict Islamic practice. Jihad, interestingly, is not translated as a military or spiritual effort or struggle (common translations of this term) but more vaguely as Muslims' "effort to make their own society".
Instructor B encouraged his students to participate in secular societies *as* Muslims, in idealistic terms. This can be partly explained by his idea that secular states are best for Muslims at this moment in history:

You can use a secular society in the interest of your religion. (Instructor B)

Moreover, Instructor B uses the word "space" to describe a combination of societal conditions that allow certain changes in society to happen. Crucially, he believes Muslims should behave *according to their status*, rather than focusing on equality, as status determines the role that people adopt in the public realm and the types of "demands" people can make:

The point is that you need to know the space … if your conditions are the same ... like Mecca you do like in Mecca, if the conditions are like Medina you don't have to go back to Mecca. If

the conditions are victorious then behave like the battle of Badr, if you're defeated then behave like in the Battle of Uhud. (Institute B)

This position is consistent with the *methodology of the Prophets* (the theory of change), which, he says, emulates the different styles of engagement of the Prophets at each stage of their lives, each of which is determined by the level of power being held at any particular time. There is no ultimate end to this process, history is portrayed as a constant cyclical motion backward and forward, so the aim is to constantly strive to move from one stage to another as social and political conditions change. Instructor B's approach is also pragmatic. At this point in time, he argues, when the condition of Muslims are "weak", secular democracies are the best spaces to help Muslim communities develop their religious work:

The ideal scenario … for Muslims [is that] they work for a fair secular state, [the] Islamic state certainly will fail because the field is not ready. The only good thing for Muslims at the moment is a secular fair state … which is fair for everybody… they will give you space to work, then you can educate, then that secular state will give you a chance ... Muslims at the moment don't deserve more than a secular state. (Instructor B)

Instructor B is very critical of Muslim-majority countries, his rationale for rejecting the idea of an Islamic state is also related to the fact that in his opinion, these countries are "weak" due to lack of proper religious formation/education. He does not attribute the dysfunctionality of Muslim countries to colonisation or westernisation. He argues instead that the root cause of this weakness lies *within* the Muslim community. Very much like early reformist scholars of the 19th century, the root of the problem for Instructor B is lack of proper understanding of Islam, which explains his focus on educational activities. Instructor B, therefore, may be critical of the philosophical and moral assumptions behind secular democracy, yet he also sees that the conditions that come with secularism, essentially the freedom to organise, have formative value.

Instructor B, however, shows that his opinions regarding activism and justice differ from contemporary ideas in significant ways. He explains that the three stages of the *methodology of the Prophets* require:

> A lot of compromise, because when you're in the process of building the nation if you keep insisting from the very beginning on justice, you'll never succeed. (Institute B)

In Instructor B's narrative, the issue of justice should be seen not as a yearning for equality but rather the ability to endure difficult situations and accept one's ranking in society. He gives examples of this at both the individual level and the sociopolitical level. At the individual level, he emphasises first of all duty and compliance:

> If you're rich, you need to know (your) duties as a rich person and if you're poor the duties as a poor … and this changes all the time. (Institute B)

By emphasising duties over rights, the instructor is highlighting the need to accept one's position and status within society. Instructor B's views are very different to Instructor A's insistence that the biography should teach students to fight for social justice and "stand up for the poor and oppressed". This key difference indicates very different readings of the Prophet's life.

The instructor's *methodology of the Prophets,* which I understand as a critique of modern activism, is closely linked to the instructor's understanding of history. Instructor B's position is similar to Eickelman's description of Islamic education in the context of Morocco's scholarly culture at the turn of the last century (Eickelman, 1977). Eickelman sees that among scholars as well as reformers, there was an "accepted popular notion of social inequality," which was understood as a "'natural' fact of the social order" (p. 174). In the same vein, Instructor B insisted that people are passive actors in the grand scheme of history. Instructor B argues that Muslims must abide by the rules and etiquettes attached to their status in society, however dynamic it is, rather than actively seeking to change the conditions that perpetuate the existence of social

inequalities. He explains that history is cyclical, so conditions change but change isn't the result of people's agency (i.e people cannot manipulate social conditions to achieve a particular result). Like for the individual agency, change for Instructor B should not be sought at the social and political level either:

> If you get the money at any time then you can go [to perform pilgrimage], but you don't go out and save money to save up for *hajj* [pilgrimage]. The same thing with *hudud* [*corporal and capital punishments*], you don't go and set up an Islamic state in order implement *hudud*. If the state comes then [the] rule applies, if not, then no. (Institute B)

This passage is essential to understand Instructor B's approach to activism. He advises not to engage in actions that are directly conducive to achieving a specific objective, for example saving money to go to *hajj*. Rather, he advises Muslims to get on with their religious responsibilities according to their social status, for example the obligation of prayer. Only if the conditions *happen* to develop (one happens to have the money), can Muslims think of fulfilling additional duties (perform *hajj*). The objective of acquiring additional duties, therefore, should not be actively sought. It follows that different social ranks in society should be simply accepted as they are, not challenged or discarded.

The exact same logic applies to the political level. The instructor tells his students *not* to seek political change, not to seek to establish an Islamic state, not to focus on political liberation struggles (e.g. Palestine). Only if the conditions *happen* to develop (by God's will), does it becomes a duty to create an Islamic society. Such conditions develop naturally by fulfilling religious obligations, like prayer and emulation of the *sunna*, not by working directly towards an objective. I define this a "passive" conception of history. This passive definition of history, perhaps inadvertently, justifies Muslims' assimilation and acceptance of Western secular/liberal society while holding on religious views that, on occasions, seem to be critical of secular and liberal values (see discussion of leadership in Chapter 9). His understanding of social change through piety and worship, which differs in important ways from

contemporary forms of activism, balances everyday civic practice in secular contexts with the search for political alternatives.

Instructor B's stance also aligns with the view that Islamic law has developed through a "casuistical method" where the law develops "not so much through the analytic refinement of concepts as through the casuistic specification of applicable phenomena" (Messick, 1992, p. 63). This means that legal positions tend to develop through addition of real-life examples rather than through thinking about hypothetical situations or abstract ideals. This possibly explains why, in the absence of a concrete reality, there is no apparent interest in formulating, let alone implementing, a comprehensive theory of "Islamic governance" or of an "Islamic society". The theory only exists in the collective imaginary as an abstract idea; the instructor sees no value in trying to work out details or make short-term plans. If that *reality* were to arise, then he (and other scholars) would work to extract answers from the body of Islamic texts by re-evaluating legal precedents and finding analogies with past cases. Answering hypothetical questions about an ideal Islamic society is therefore foreign to Instructor B's methodology.

Instructor B's critique of contemporary Islamic movements is also consistent with his three-step *methodology of Prophets* (the theory of change), the "passive reception of history" through submission of agency to God. Consider the examples below:

> One of the problems in our time has been for many, many Muslim movements that they did not recognize they are in a weak position. It is very important to understand that sometimes [they] will have positions of modesty and sometimes they will have position of strength. (Institute B)

Here, Instructor B argued that Islamic sociopolitical movements have focused on being treated fairly and on demanding social justice. He believes that this shows that they have been influenced by contemporary political ideas, which are not compatible with the *methodology of the Prophets*. This point takes us back to Instructor B's objection of Marxist and empirical methodologies outlined

in Chapter 6. He criticised the social sciences because these disciplines assume the human ability to understand society and manipulate conditions to change it. Accepting the social function of the social sciences would indirectly entail replacing scripture as a source of solutions.

As I have shown earlier, for Instructor B, Muslims should not focus on analysing the problems; rather social problems will naturally be addressed as a consequence of pious practice. He also has a twofold view of social change: on one side, Islam offers solutions and on the other, social problems are an inevitable part of his circular notion of history, where each Prophet or generation builds from the previous (*daʿwa*, *hijra*, *jihad,* on repeat). This is why the instructor wishes to stay away from Western(ised) forms of activism, as they contradict his understanding of passive agency where Muslims simply accept the status quo and fulfil their religious obligations without actively seeking to change the society. This whole discourse is in direct response to the legacy of Islamic political movements. It becomes clear when he compares modern Islamic activism with Prophet Ibrahim's activism. He explains:

> The activism that Mawdudi wanted was political activism; the activism of Ibrahim was activism of *ʿibāda* (worship) and *imān* (faith). (Instructor B)

Here, the instructor juxtaposes the activism of Mawdudi (the founder of the *Jammat-e-Islami* in British India in 1941) with the "activism" of Prophet Ibrahim. The instructor believes that Mawdudi's understanding, and application of activism was influenced by modern European politics and not rooted in traditional Islam. In the following passage, he explains:

> Islamic activism is different activism (sic), is more like *ʿibāda* and *daʿwa,* which however leads to the same ending but in nice order, in sequence one after the other. Political activism is basically protesting, marching, *jihad* ... political activism has harmed Islam so much, the Muslims ... The activism that comes from Islam has really concern for the whole community (through) *ʿibāda*, *daʿwa*. (Institute B)

He concludes from this that the word activism does not exist in Islam:

I don't like the word activism, we don't have a word activism, it's not a good word anyway; the word is *ʿibāda* and *daʿwa*. (Institute B)

Islamic activism means simply carrying out the everyday duties that are ascribed to Muslims: *ʿibāda* (one word to describe service, participating in ritual/worship), and *daʿwa* (education). Crucially, in the above passage Instructor B defines *jihad* as political activism (perhaps militancy), which he says "harmed Islam so much". The *order* in his theory of change acquires special importance, because even *jihad* can be harmful if performed without the necessary position of power.

Instructor B disapproves, therefore, of modern militant methods, which are similar to the practices of some anarchist, separatist and leftist movements of the 19th and 20th century. He reiterates how the final result is not important in itself, rather what counts is the *correct process*: the emulation of the Prophet's practices, which includes prayer, and the acceptance of this cyclical motion of history (i.e the three stages of the *methodology of the Prophets*).

8.3 Balancing pluralism and universality

Another insight into Instructor A's understanding of activism can be found in his views on pluralism vis-à-vis his understanding of Islam as a universal faith/truth. In this section, I analyse how Instructor A handled the issues of religious coexistence and tolerance while asserting Islam as a theologically superior and absolute truth.

I have shown previously that Instructor A often talked about Islam as being "under attack". Both Instructors A and B reacted, albeit in different ways, to perceived hostility from the "outside". One major threat was the negative portrayal of Islam in Western media and academia. This was clear on several occasions during the lessons. For example, Instructor A once answered one of the students' questions regarding religious intolerance in Islam:

I think this is the classic problem: they accuse and insinuate, they read into an event, and Muslims have to be on the defensive back-pedal all the time. How many holes have we had to dig ourselves out of, all because we couldn't stop reading anti-Islamic literature or listening to their falsehood in the name of 'research'? Institute A

This sentence likely refers to the fact that his students often showed signs of anxiety and doubt after being exposed to negative portrayals of Islam. As a result, they often posed questions that seek to answer those doubts, the unintended consequences of this being therefore that anti-Islamic discourse tends to dominate conversation in the (live) class and discussion forums. Instructor A's rationale for his apologetic approach is that teaching Islam online means providing reassurance to students who doubt their faith following exposure to material critical or inimical to Islam.

Instructor A, during an interview with me, mentioned that students' questions about anti-Islamic arguments were so common that he kept a dedicated folder on his computer with frequently asked questions and answers. The questions were always the same: destruction of idols, slavery, status of women, stoning, religious intolerance, violence and so on. Instructor A explained to me at the time that he would often use these answer templates in the forums as well as in private email correspondence with students.

On one hand, therefore, it seems that Institute A not only aims to provide Muslims with opportunities to learn but also offers a safe space for students to find reassurance in moments of doubt. On the other, perceiving any criticism from the outside (however false, exaggerated or politically motivated) as a threat is also quite telling of the methodological approach of the instructor. When the purpose of education is reassurance or confirmation of prior beliefs by learning predetermined answers, there is likely to be less room to explore ideas and interpretations of texts openly and critically.

Perhaps as a result of the popular demand for ready-made certainties, the instructor drew distinctions between sources of knowledge: reputable traditional

Islamic knowledge and antagonistic portrayals of Islam from academia, media and popular culture. Instructor A's advice to his students was to ignore the latter altogether:

The bottom line is, be confident, don't let the mass media and negative opinion shape your perceptions of the religion, take from true knowledge first, not as an antidote, and stay away from … 'doubt porn', reading untrue accusations against Islam as a way of 'just *having to find out the truth'*. Institute A

Here, Instructor A is not offering his students tools to assess the quality and the content of various sources of information, wherever they may be found. He is telling his students that as a rule of thumb, they should combat their own desire to seek truth by avoiding material that is critical of Islam from outside sources. Instructor A unapologetically frames Islam as a universal theological truth that is incompatible with other religious or philosophical truth claims. As I have explained in previous chapters, Instructor A also keeps the natural and social sciences at a distance, a step below Islamic knowledge. Here, I look in particular at some of the social and political ramifications of this epistemic hierarchy by analysing how the instructor discussed religious pluralism and tolerance.

In the online classroom, the belief in the supremacy of the Islamic epistemic truth is often balanced with positions that embrace pluralism and tolerance. One example of this is Instructor A's description of the Night Journey. In this famous story, which some Muslims insist should not be understood allegorically, the Prophet is believed to have flown during the night all the way to Jerusalem where he led all previous Prophets in prayer. Instructor A on this occasion makes this special prayer a symbol of coexistence between nations:

The fact that all the Prophets prayed there, it shows that unity of mankind, it is a religion of coexistence and so this is the attitude that we should be taking looking at Jerusalem, a look of mercy at the people of the scriptures towards the Christians and the Jews and not saying that this is a war of *ummas*, not a clash of civilisations, rather a high mindedness and a message of coexistence. (Institute A)

Elsewhere, Instructor A had explained that 124,000 Prophets have existed at different points in history to give guidance to all communities around the world and that at times many of these Prophets coexisted on earth. He also claimed that while some Prophets established laws that were qualitative different from one another, the same beliefs were consistent among all the Prophets. For the instructor, the circulation of different beliefs is therefore the result of corruption and deviance from those original beliefs. The existence of a multiplicity of Prophets provides simultaneously a basis for two apparently contradictory ideas: coexistence of different faiths and the supremacy of Islam.

By highlighting that the Prophets of Islam reached people in all times and places, Instructor A rationalised both pluralism *and* universalism into a coherent system held together *by* Islam. In the following passage, the instructor captures the shift between pluralism and universality by using the same notion of the "multiplicity of Prophets", this time by explaining it in relation to the final Prophet, Muhammad:

> In those times the world was not a global village … let's say ... 2000 years ago there were still nations that had not had contact with one another … and so it made sense that every nation receives one messenger, however as the message … started to get distorted, it didn't seem a message anymore and this caused many religions to come about, so Allah *subḥānahu wa-taʿālā* in His wisdom sent one final messenger. (Institute A)

Instructor A in these passages uses modern political and sociological ideas to interpret a traditional Islamic origins story. For him, Muhammad leading all Prophets in prayer demonstrates a predisposition towards plurality and peaceful coexistence. This image is used to refute Huntington's theory of a "clash of civilisations" (Huntington, 1996), which the instructor translates as a "clash of *ummas*". Instructor A also uses McLuhan's idea of the "global village" (McLuhan, 1963) (i.e. globalisation) to explain two different stages: beginning with a plurality of Prophets and messengers and ending with one final messenger (Muhammad) meant for all human beings. The finality of Prophet Muhammad makes all future and past religions void. Universalising the

prophethood of Muhammed here explains (and anticipates) the process of globalisation.

Instructor A explains that before Islam, there could be a multiplicity of laws around the world that catered to different cultures and circumstances (although they all encapsulated the same belief in one God). After Islam, this changed: the same laws are now universal and applicable to all human beings. So, how can pluralism be justified today? In the post-Islamic period, the instructor justifies pluralism in terms of rights:

Muslims did actually define themselves according to their religious identity separate from others … right, so it was clear that [the document] wasn't saying that all religions had to become one, there's clear definition, however, others are given rights and actually, it said that that there will be mutual help in case of any common threat to society. (Institute A – Defining the Medinan constitution)

Instructor A seeks to balance the need to advance the truth of Islam while upholding pluralism. Religious coexistence, from Instructor A's point of view, is coherent with the idea of a religious hierarchy where Islam is above all other religions. In fact, it is the very authority of Islam over other religions that allows religious coexistence, thanks to God's infinite mercy and benevolence. The instructor reiterated the supremacy of Islam in different forms, sometimes subtly. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The biggest sign, this is probably the biggest sign of the Night Journey is unity, and it shows the unity of truth and the unity of mankind... (Institute A)

Here, theology ("unity of truth") comes together with society ("unity of mankind"). This theological truth becomes a form of activism that is extremely similar to Instructor B's view of *ʿibāda* as an authentic form of Islamic activism:

Dhuhr (midday prayer) is prayed in broad light, and this is because the truth that came down in the prayer is something that should be manifest - clear and loudly - and should be clear in broad day light for everyone to see, *just like the dīn [religion] itself would be a dīn that is manifest over all religions*. (Institute A) [my emphasis]

Religious practice ("prayer") is a manifestation of "truth" ("unity of truth") that should be announced loud and clear in the public space. Prayer is depicted by Instructor A as a form of activism similar to political protest in modern political contexts: advocating a message openly in public, for all to see. A similar position is held by premodern scholar Ahmad al-Wansharisi (d. 1508) who wrote of the prayer "performed in total openness and grandeur" being a mark of supremacy of Islam over all other religions (March, 2011, p. 109). Interestingly, Al-Wansharisi made this comment because he was also concerned about Muslims living as minorities under non-Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula. Instructor A employs the performance of ritual prayer in public as a form of activism, like Instructor B defined *ʿibāda* (ritual worship, which includes communal prayer) as a form of activism also within a Muslim minority context. This recurrent theme of seeking to establish truth over falsehood, or Islam over all other religions can feel at odds with Instructor A's claim that Islam is a religion of coexistence, since imposing a theological truth over falsehood, even if this truth includes pluralism, only allows room for tolerance on unequal terms.

8.4 Final observations: a constant balancing act

As I showed in Chapter 7, criticality can be defined in different ways. It can refer to the skills needed to navigate a specific discipline, procedures for making arguments and assessing information, or even more generally, the ability to make civic and political decisions. Criticality can also be directed towards different goals. It may be "functional" to carrying out a specific job or task, which means abiding to pre-set rules, or it may mean "transformative", meaning it provides skills to disrupt the status quo and change those very rules

The two case studies A and B offer an opportunity to reflect on the types of criticality being used in the classroom. The topics discussed in the online lectures seem to require some subject-specific critical thinking to be able to navigate Islamic sources as well as a more multidisciplinary approach to be able to think criticality about society (the first step to take critical action in the world). However, in practice the instructors demonstrated an unwillingness to consider methods and ideas outside the traditional field of Islamic studies.

Instructor B taught technical knowledge at a more advanced level. Such knowledge may be classed as “transformative” in some respects. For example, he questioned some of the premises of formal Islamic knowledge (authentication and logic of textual traditions), the self (critique of the state of Muslim communities and lack of education) and the world (questioning Western forms of activism and social justice, modern historical methods, and academia). At the same time, Instructor B did not question the status quo. Rather, he encouraged his students to accept the position they hold in society. He adopted a view that could be called pragmatic, working according to the rules of the system without actively seeking systemic change or addressing injustices. If we define criticality as “critical action”, the type of education advocated by Instructor B cannot be regarded as fully “transformative”.

Instructor B’s approach can be called transformative only because he believes education should change individuals (“making Muslims”) and the world (“making the Islamic society”). But this transformation is somewhat limited because it is only to be achieved within the framework of traditional/normative Islam. In terms of activism, Instructor B advocated a view that he considered “traditional” (prior to revivalist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries), where activism equates to the notions and practice of *daʿwa* and *ʿibāda.* He also criticises contemporary notions of “social justice” in favour of a worldview that accepts inequalities. These inequalities can be addressed with constant self-improvement through the emulation of the Prophet’s customs and prophetic life cycle. Crucially, in their own ways, both instructors saw traditional Islamic ritual,

like prayer, as a form of civic engagement and in doing so they challenged (or added a religious dimension to) Western forms of political engagement.

Instructor A did not equip his students with the necessary tools and resources to think critically about Islamic traditions because he thought the process of acquiring knowledge must happen under the guidance of an experienced scholar through extended personal contact. He also thought that contemporary scholars are not qualified to engage in *ijtihād* (see Chapter 2). He did, however, offer answers that students could use in response to anti-Islamic narratives. Instructor A's approach to critical thinking may be considered a type of "instrumental criticality" that is only transformative insofar as it fulfils its mission to defend Islam.

At the same time, both Instructors A and B find ways to reconcile views that clash with mainstream, Western secular ideas of pluralism, activism, and justice today. What happened in the classroom is similar to the idea of finding an "overlapping consensus". Andrew March (2011) worked with the idea of an overlapping consensus to formulate a notion of citizenship that justifies engagement with secular society from both Islamic and liberal perspectives. In the case of Instructor A, the overlapping consensus, based on his particular understanding of normative Islam and modern secular democracies, is the discourse on rights, equality and social justice. In the case of Instructor B, it is an agreement that secular contexts can help the Muslim community prosper through education. Importantly, both instructors also place some reservations on this "overlap", namely Islamic morals, and the problem of forming alliances with Marxist and LGBTQ+ groups (Instructor A) and the theory of change through ritual obligations and a passive notion of history, which eventually aspires to an independent society informed by Islamic values in some unspecified future (Instructor B).

The instructors juggle two different understandings of knowledge of the world and of the self: one is the secular democratic world that they operate in and the other the Islamic body of ideas that they are immersed in. Both these worlds

compete for practical embodiment in the process of constant (re)formation of the self. The act of narrating the stories of the Prophets is therefore instrumental to balancing these two dimensions of the self. The stories become important symbols, for example the idea of all Prophets praying behind Muhammad gives an Islamic justification for modern civic and religious pluralism. Online Islamic education offers opportunities to negotiate and formulate contemporary civic/political meanings from the traditions. In this sense, Salvatore's (2009) definition of tradition is appropriate:

> Bundled templates of social practice transmitted, transformed and reflected upon by arguments and discourses across cultures and generations. (p. 6)

Salvatore's definition highlights the plethora of interpretative strategies, multiple sources of knowledge and points of reference that play a part in the continuous reformulation of Islam *and* modernity. Ideas circulate in volatile and fragmented ways and thus their movements across time and space are difficult to document and trace. When I observe the balancing of apparent contradictory positions, I often think about the process of meaning-making conceptualised by Ahmed:

> People explore and express the potential meanings of the Truth of Islam through communicative mechanisms and structures that support the coherent production and maintenance of inevitable tension and contradiction. (2017, p. 406)

It is possible that the approach adopted by the two instructors is overly legalistic-prescriptive, focusing on Text over "Con-Text" and "Pre-Text". Ahmed, however, argues that "locating Islamic norms" should not be done in "disciplinary isolation", meaning in the "confinement of the putative domain of the religious/sacred rather than the secular/profane" (p. 407). He sees meaning-making as a necessarily interdisciplinary effort that travels across domains of knowledge, including fiction, music and art. I expand on the need of interdisciplinarity in the next chapter.

The instructors – my “informants” or, to use a better word, co-creators of this body of knowledge – are public intellectuals who are involved in social and political theory as well as practice. They theorise how societies change and how identities form, while trying to create a positive impact in the world through Islamic education. Activism, as a result of this process, is not only theorised in the classroom but *practised through Islamic education*. This is why it is important to understand the interpretative approaches, the modes of criticality and the political meanings that develop in Islamic educational contexts. Being online, these lectures remain within the realm of ideas (theory), even though, as I have shown, the very performance of Islamic education is conceptualised by the instructors as a key aspect of *daʿwa to Muslims,* it aims to have an impact in the “real world”. The practice of Islamic education, therefore, needs to be understood as a form of civic engagement. If, as the instructors have argued in the online classroom, education is *daʿwa* and *daʿwa* is a form of activism, then these educational institutions should be conceptualised as social movements as much as social movements should be conceptualised as sites for the production of knowledge.

In Chapter 9, I expand on the notion of Islamic education as activism, provide examples of grassroots political theorising and offer some concluding thoughts regarding the need for more comparative research about the educational value of activism across contemporary religious and secular social movements.

Chapter 9: Directions in Political Imagination: Different Traditions, Shared Challenges

9.1 Methodology as a political position

In previous chapters, I explored how the epistemological and methodological approaches of Instructors A and B reflect their civic positions and concerns. In the following sections, I will discuss instead the political implications of these epistemological and methodological choices, such as those positions that refer to issues of governance and political leadership. Previously, I have shown that Instructor B's emphasis on following the customs of the Prophet (*sunna*) had implications on his theory of history and social change, which, in turn, influenced his critique of modern forms of political activism. For the instructor, internalising the character of the Prophet was the only way to indirectly activate social change.

Both instructors' reservations about modern academia, and in particular the social sciences, came from the view that ultimately social solutions come organically from following religious scripture. Their hierarchical organisation of knowledge – with religious knowledge at the top, followed by the natural sciences and technology – served to legitimise Islamic knowledge. Both instructors' constant comparisons between Islamic traditional education and modern academic methods (Chapter 6) and their observations about the role of education in the formation of Western powers (Chapter 7) led to the position that education is a key catalyst for the development of Muslims and the creation of an Islamic society.

The epistemological positions adopted by the instructors sought to undermine the claim that we can resolve social problems and organise society using reason and empirical evidence alone. If modern disciplines like psychology,

sociology, economics or political science are able to explain and solve the problems of society, then religious scripture no longer fulfils that function. For this reason, the methodological principles that govern the interpretation and function of religious scripture have political significance. They are the foundation of political discourse.

As this thesis has shown so far, the instructors – despite adopting a text-based, literalist approach to Islam – also have a pragmatic approach to democratic participation in society. I call this type of participation "pragmatic" because it complies to mainstream citizenship and cultivates social capital even in absence of a full commitment to the values of secularism or liberal democracy. In the online classes, the instructors create spaces for the contestation of Western education, culture and politics while promoting a type of civic engagement that conforms with the values and norms of a secular democratic society. Civic engagement involves engaging in and excelling in educational, personal and professional activities in the community and serves the function of *daʿwa* (Islamic education and propagation).

The critiques of Western academia and society put forward by the two instructors open a space to dream of Islamic political *alternatives*, even though these alternatives are never elaborated in any detail. The unwillingness to outline the shape of these political alternatives perhaps derives from an Islamic legal tradition that prefers dealing with actual, rather than hypothetical, situations. Or perhaps, it has to do with the fact that defining what a political alternative should look like could potentially raise tensions with the idea of complying to secular, democratic notions of citizenship. As I explained in Chapter 8, the instructors balance a yearning towards an Islamised society and the reality of the democratic nation state.

In this chapter, I will first look at the instructors' positions on governance, leadership and the state and then explore contemporary forms of political imagination (or lack thereof) with examples from Muslim and non-Muslim perspectives. I conclude by showing that the desire to develop a political

imagination beyond the boundaries of the current political system – often limited by Western forms of representative democracy, party politics or the notion of the nation state – is a shared feeling that characterises social movements also outside of Islam.

9.2 Students seeking concrete political answers

Online students usually navigate different educational spaces, from *YouTube* lectures to more structured programmes of learning. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that the education received elsewhere does not fulfil their intellectual and spiritual needs as Muslims. They are, in a way, "educational" nomads in a "marketplace of knowledge transmission" (Bunt, 2018, p. 84). On one occasion, a student said that such "travel" for the sake of acquiring knowledge, enabled Muslims to emulate the pious scholars of the past, from the comfort of one's home. During my fieldwork, both instructors at Institutes A and B encouraged questions from students and, on occasions, Instructor B affirmed the importance of being open-minded and critical. At times, when Instructor B insisted that Muslims should agree on a step-by-step plan to develop a Muslim society (the theory of change / *methodology of the Prophets* discussed at different points during this thesis), the students seemed unsatisfied with the generic answers provided and yearned for more practical solutions. They wanted to know how an Islamic state would be established, how leaders would be selected and how exactly the state would be run.

In response to questions from the students who were in the physical classroom (the video recordings sometimes showed interactions between the instructor and the students), Instructor B explained that Muslims, as a community, are not at the stage where they can think about implementing a state. They are merely at the stage of *daʿwa*, building the foundations of faith through education. Again and again, students interrogated the instructor on the definitions of "society",

“leadership”, “law” or “state”, sometimes even with some frustration. Especially at Institute B, the students seemed to want to confront the instructor’s quietist views. Some students’ questions suggested a desire for a more explicit political position. For example, one student wanted to know if Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation was a religious duty, while another asked the instructor if an Islamic leader would have political or religious power, or both. Many of the questions suggested that the students were going through an intellectual journey to navigate (their understanding of normative) “Islam” vis-à-vis the secular principles that they were familiar with (e.g. the separation between state and clergy). The same happened when the students inquired about an Islamic state and the instructor’s reply questioned the use of the term “state” in the first place. The Prophet’s space was not a “state”, Instructor B said, but a “society”, the Prophet was not a political leader, but a “man of the society”, an almost fatherly figure, as I will explain in the next section.

On occasions, some of the students seemed unsatisfied and continued probing the instructor with practical questions. When Instructor B insisted on the need for unity and a single leadership for all Muslims, a student asked – with a humorous tone – if the instructor would put himself forward as a potential candidate or if he would like to propose some candidates. To this question, the instructor replied dismissively that any scholar would be able to do the job. Unity for the instructor was most important, irrespective of the methods to achieve it. According to Instructor B, Muslims cannot achieve a higher level of engagement (stage in the *methodology of the Prophets*) if they continue to disagree on minor technicalities.

The insistence on Muslim unity also shows that Instructor B is aware of how decentralised the Muslim community is and that he sees this as a negative, rather than a positive characteristic. The instructor also chooses not to mention what is known about Muslim history, namely that – except for a brief period during the last years of the life of Muhammad – Islamic unity has never existed in practice in the way he seems to aspire to. Instructor B does not go as far as

providing a detailed explanation of how leadership would be selected and how this decision-making would take place because, for him, unity is only a generic slogan with no consensus and few precedents across history. Perhaps, this is the reason why Muslim students were frustrated when they could not find easy answers to their practical questions. These questions were asked because Islamic educational spaces are relatively relaxed environments where students – adult Muslims who choose to be there – can ask questions and explore issues. The students' desire to dig deeper is understandable and justified. On one side, Islamic adult education focuses on traditional Islamic subjects (Qurʾanic exegeses, jurisprudence, principles of faith), but on the other, students are eager to learn about political theory and practice, most likely because the question of the "Islamic state" has been so prominent in recent history. Discussions about these topics are sought-after, but under-theorised.

9.3 Keeping a distance from the idea of the state

I have shown previously that the instructors often explain Islamic ideas in relation to their perception of the West. In Chapters 6 and 7, I showed that the lectures focused on Islamic methodology vis-à-vis Western academia, and, in Chapter 8, they focused on power formation and forms of civic engagement in the West vis-à-vis "Islamic activism" (*ʿibāda* and *daʿwa).* In this section, I explore if and how the instructors talked about a government or political entity inspired by the Islamic traditions and the biography of the Prophet.

In the online classes, the instructors were not concerned with any particular form of government. They did not discuss in any depth the idea of Western democracy, which was, as I will show here, appreciated by the instructors to varying degrees. They also did not mention the caliphate in any way other than historical terms. They were also not so concerned with the type of political entity, the form given to the polity, that would best work for the Muslim

community. In fact, both instructors took steps to distance Islam from the idea of the modern nation state. They described the ideal polity in terms of an "Islamic society" led by a benevolent fatherly figure who acted as a mediator between people and communities. Islam was presented by the instructors as a force against tribalism, which was sometimes equated with today's idea of nationalism. However, overall many of the classes I attended were characterised by the absence of political references even when the topics being discussed were political. Generally, explicit references to politics were sparse and alluded to cursorily.

To explain why the idea of the state and political topics were evasive, it is important to provide some context. It is sometimes argued that in the past century Islamic political thought has suffered a decline (Belkeziz 2009). This deterioration began with a shift in the understanding of political authority and accountability. At the turn of the 20th century, widespread political dissatisfaction led intellectuals such as Rashid Rida (d. 1935) to focus on the need for political unity and the obligation of establishing a caliphate through educational reform (I showed previously how Instructor B was inspired by these modern Muslim intellectuals to see education as a key catalyst for political change). Subsequently, the focus shifted once more from a caliphate towards a polity that resembled a nation state increasingly reliant on religious authority (for example, with Hasan al-Banna, 1906-1949).

With thinkers like Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), Abu ʾl-aʿla Mawdudi (1903-1979), and Abu Al-Hasan al-Nadwi (1913-1999), the notion shifted further towards a fully-fledged theocratic state where the political and religious elites are one and the same (ibid). With al-Banna, the matter of establishing Islamic rule is also "upgraded" from merely a jurisprudential matter*,* on which there could be difference of opinion, to a creedal matter (which is what determines one's identity as a Muslim). Mawdudi develops the idea of a "theo-democracy" wherein ordinary Muslims participate in the process of consultation. In practice, who is entitled to participate and run for office remains extremely limited. "When

one digs a little deeper" Belkeziz explains, "Mawdudi allocates powers of *ijtihād* to those Muslims "who have achieved the capability of interpretation"" (Belkeziz, 2009, p. 131).

Conceptually at least, this shift takes Islamic political theory one step closer to the modern idea of popular sovereignty within a territorial nation state. As March (2019) argued, in premodern Islam, sovereignty resided in the office of the caliph, with Mawdudi, sovereignty becomes increasingly associated with the Muslim community (*umma*) as a whole, in a delegated, symbolic manner. With this idea, the nation state assumes modern characteristics, such as the provision of state control to regulate people and cultivate "moral perfection". The notion of the state becomes utopic and shifts away from the pragmatism that tended to characterise premodern Islamic scholarship. The ubiquity of the nation state means that "Muslims today, including their leading intellectuals, have come to take the modern state for granted, accepting it is a natural reality…" as if it was "…sanctioned in the Qurʾan" and "drafted in Medina fourteen centuries ago" (Hallaq, 2014, p. X). Such historical trajectory, Belkeziz argued, has reached its lowest point in the contemporary period because the term "Islamic state" has been taken over by "pseudo-*fuqaha"*, a minority of militant Muslims with a rigid understanding of Islam and supposedly little or no formal training in traditional Islamic disciplines (Belkeziz, 2009, pp. X- XI). This is directly related to the impact of new information technologies, the rise of "new intellectuals" and the decentralisation of Islamic authority outlined in Chapter 2. The historical trajectory of these political ideas provides a possible explanation as to why both Instructors A and B distanced themselves from the notion of the "state". While maintaining fairly idealistic views, the instructors' idealism was often expressed using non-political terms such as "community" and "society". The instructors explicitly dismissed the idea of the "state" in order to send a message to those Muslims who believe that the establishment of an Islamic state is an obligation and an essential part of faith. For Instructor A at least, this meant an explicit disassociation from Islamism. In email communications,

Instructor A explained that this disassociation from “extreme” views was necessary given the context of hostility towards Islam that he knew existed in the public realm. Instructor A felt the need to explain this to me even though his political position remained always quietist and accommodating. This reflects a concern that state surveillance of non-violent “extremist ideologies” impacts on freedom of speech (Jarvis & Legrand, 2018) and deters Muslims from exploring political ideas and developing their critical, political imagination. If mainstream spaces do not allow open conversations, then those conversations are suppressed and forced underground, to be held in contexts where diversity of perspectives and depth of conversation are limited.

Despite the dismissal of the “state” as a useful political category, the instructors were not opposed to the creation of an ideal Muslim society. As I have shown in previous chapters, educating Muslims in order to create a society where Muslims could organize themselves according to Islamic values and norms, was an important element of the online lessons. This is because the creation of a “society of Muslims” is an important part of the Prophet’s mission and feels relevant to many minority Muslim contexts today. The instructors’ constant reminders of the status of Muslims as minorities in Western countries makes reliving the story of the Prophet – as he moves from a minority context (Mecca) to a fully-fledged Muslim society – particularly poignant. The ideal “Muslim society” that the instructors convey in the classes recalls the “utopic” vision of the state of modern Muslim revivalists such as Mawdudi. For example, the instructors’ insistence that Islamic “education makes Muslims”, their focus on “perfecting character” through piety and their desire to establish a moral society based on genuine conviction (rather than culture/custom) bear a striking resemblance to some elements of modern Islamic political thought. As I have described previously, however, the instructors balance their longing for a utopic ideal society with pragmatism. They do not want their students to do anything to achieve this “ideal society” other than being good, productive, and law-

abiding citizens of whatever country they find themselves in, secular democratic or otherwise.

It is perhaps the case that the lack of engagement with the idea of creating an alternative "Islamic state" is also due to a line of Islamic political thought that advocates obedience to the rulers (Afsaruddin, 2006), which is still a topic of heated debate amongst Muslims scholars and public intellectuals on social media today, including among neo-traditionalists (al-Azami, 2019). Such unconditional commitment to political leaders renders the idea of dissent and protest unattractive. Instructor B had a distinctive, and perhaps more complex way of distancing his political thought from the idea of the "Islamic state". He argued that the "state" is not an accurate word to describe the polity that the Prophet wanted to establish. For the instructor, the Prophet's "space" was not a "state" but a "society", and the Prophet was not a political leader, but a "man of the society", a fatherly figure. Even though he championed an activism that followed the three stages of prophethood (*methodology of Prophets/ theory of change*), he suggested that applying contemporary political concepts to the Prophet's time was simply an anachronism. The current system of nation states did not reflect the experience that the Prophet had of power:

> Basically, a man of the society … so giving him the title of a political leader is more than it's really happening here, it is basically a man that has got a society, an organiser, you know people get married have families, they are not like a head of state. Instructor B

Instructor B's statement brings to mind a position put forward by Hallaq (2014), who argues, in perhaps idealistic terms, that Islamic scholars used to interpret God's word as a form of service to the community, not to preserve the state. This idea is similar to Instructor B's description of the Prophet as a caring "family man" whose family is his entire society, present and future, and whose work continues through the work of the scholars. Muslim scholars, according to Hallaq, were people of the society, born and bred from the grassroots. As such, the law, Hallaq argues, "was not designed to serve the ruler or any form of

political power" and "in this sense, it was not only deeply democratic but humane in ways unrecognizable to the modern state and its law" (ibid. p. 72). In this view, the idea of an "Islamic state" is not only an anachronism but also a contradiction in terms (an oxymoron). In the Western political tradition, the nation state "is metaphysically the ultimate foundation of sovereign will" (Hallaq, 2014, p. 49) and its only aim is self-preservation. This conception of the polity, according to Hallaq, clashes with the Islamic principle that God is the ultimate sovereign.

This emphasis on "community" in legal practice is helpful to make sense of Instructor B's preference for the word "society" and the instructor's insistence on community education and informal norms over formal laws and political authorities. This perhaps can be called a "communitarian" approach. Instructor B, when he was comparing the Prophet to a family man and the Muslim society to a family, elicits the image of a close-knit social and political organisation based on a collective sense of morals and duties.

Another example of how Instructor B distanced himself from political Islam and the notion of an "Islamic state" occurred in answer to a question by one of his students about activism in support of Palestinian liberation. Instructor B thought that Muslims should not be too concerned with the acquisition of political power in relation to the occupation of Palestinian territories. On this occasion, his reading of contemporary political relations was informed by Prophet Jesus' life. Jesus lived his entire life under Roman rule without attempting to establish his own state, the instructor argued. So political power is neither essential nor necessary. The message throughout the online lecture series was consistent: only education and worship can lead to the actualisation of political power. Physical efforts to achieve change in the political sphere are the last steps of a long-term formative and performative process (learning and imitating the example of the Prophet) and, crucially, *not a necessary step at all.* After reading a quote from Mawdudi, stating that Prophets came to this world to establish divine rule, Instructor B rebutted:

Tell me really … where did the prophets do this really? Did all of them fail? Because Isa (Jesus) never enforced any system in the face of the earth, Ibrahim (Abraham) never enforced any system in the face of the earth. (Instructor B)

Because the example of Muhammad has been politicised in recent political history, Instructor B uses examples from Prophets *other than Muhammad* to depoliticize Islamic traditions. This is surprising given that speaking truth to power is often seen as a characteristic of all the Prophets. Instructor B shifts the attention from the central figure of Muhammad to the other Prophets to highlight that living a pious life is an essential part of faith which does not necessarily include systemic change.

At any point, the opposite argument can be made as well. The focus could shift from previous Prophets to Muhammad to highlight the importance of the physical efforts needed to establish a community against privilege and injustice. An example of this can be found in an online talk by Abou el Fadl of the Usuli Institute, a progressive American institute, when he explained that "the difference between Jesus and Muhammad is that Muhammad, his historical circumstances, allowed him, in fact, to lead a rebellion against the same ritualistic statism that Jesus and Moses condemned before" (The Usuli Institute, 2017). When asked about the Palestinian cause, Instructor B did not mention human rights or their abuses under Israeli occupation, he intentionally called his students away from demanding justice and equality. As I showed in Chapter 6, this was because demanding equality in a state of "weakness", when conditions are not ripe, according to Instructor B would not make the Muslims successful. Abou el Fadl instead, highlighted that all Prophets carried the same "divine message of justice" that empowers human beings. "Look at the people who control Mecca and Medina" he argued, "anchored in a deep, unjust distribution of wealth, a deep system of ritualism and traditionalism where the human being is systematically oppressed" and denied any creative and autonomous impulse (The Usuli Institute, 2017).

I compare the narratives from institute B and the Usuli Institute because they build very different pictures of the same geopolitical issues by making different readings the same Islamic traditions. In so doing, they also draw different boundaries between groups. By prioritising personal piety, Instructor B draws boundaries that divide Muslims and non-Muslims. In his view, Muslims can live pious lives by separating mentally from the rest (the second step of the Prophets' methodology, *hijrah)* without necessarily demanding power or equality. By prioritising justice, creativity and equality, Abou el Fadl draws boundaries that divide ordinary people (Muslim or non-Muslim alike) from the corrupt, wealthy classes to encourage activism and social change regardless of faith.

Overall, while there are some elements of Instructor A's and B's classes that suggest a desire to engage in a critique of aspects of the state, liberalism, colonialism and democracy, their critique is not comprehensively laid out and it is mostly driven by specific preoccupations (about the portrayal of Islam and Muslims and the relationship between Islam and Western culture, politics, and society). For example, they are concerned with liberal democracy because it allows a type of freedom that can potentially weaken faith and piety. The apologetic nature of much of the critique that occurred in the online lessons, i.e. the need to defend Islam, often stood in the way of critical and creative thinking and limited the breadth and scope of discussions. The classes convey a general understanding that Islam provides a counter-narrative, or even solutions, to contemporary problems, yet the creative potential of the traditions is not explored in full because of the very epistemological and methodological constraints the instructors impose on themselves. In the following sections, I will explore in more detail some of the ambiguity regarding democracy and freedom that derives from these self-imposed epistemological and methodological restraints.

9.4 Democracy: between procedural values and eternal law

In theory, modern liberal democratic states claim to be based on values like tolerance, individual freedom and equality. These values have developed and are what they are today as a result of significant popular struggle for the civil and political rights of historically marginalised, oppressed and colonised peoples (e.g. anti-slavery activists, women's and indigenous rights groups).
Many of these values (equality, justice, freedom) are defined as "procedural" because they regulate the political process, i.e. how people within a country make decisions, and not exclusively what decisions should be made. Instructor A criticised this idea because in his opinion the "substance" of decisions (i.e. laws and norms) should be based on religious rules, which supposedly never change. In fact, it is common for neo-traditionalists like Instructor A to have a negative view of democracy "since it gives individuals the right to legislate regarding everything, including issues that God has already stated in His own words." (Fattah & Butterfield, 2006, p. 63). In a democracy, decisions about collective issues become legitimate when they have been agreed by following a set of procedures (e.g. free and fair elections, referenda, parliamentary votes, court cases, etc.). The values that govern these procedures are usually established in a constitution, which, in turn, can also be amended in some circumstances through the same (often more complex) democratic processes. The assumption behind all this is that values and norms change over time to adapt to different social conditions and sensibilities. Democratic theory and practice, therefore, in principle rejects eternal dogma, apart from those procedural values that are believed to be widely agreed-upon and "bracketed out of values debates" (Han, Janmaat, May, & Morris, 2013). Even in a formal democracy, at any one stage, questioning foundational value systems may be discouraged or outlawed. For example, in 2020, the Department for Education in England prohibited the teaching of anti-capitalist and anti-democratic views, labelling them "extreme political stances" (Kirby & Webb, 2021).

While Instructor A saw the constant evolution of norms and laws negatively, he was also keen to highlight the democratic elements within Islam and the prophetic model. Throughout the classes, he emphasized that Prophet Muhammad used to consult and accept advice from elders, local leaders, community members, the youth and anyone who had expertise in a particular field. In the following passage, Instructor A is talking about Muhammad as a leader in Medina:

> A leader not only does he instil vision, but he ... he should have… they should have compassion for others, and mercy on their community and they should run their affairs through consultation, especially to those who are representatives in the community, and leaders, consultation is the way to go. (Institute A – Prophet Muhammad in Medina)

Perhaps because the Prophet is such a central figure in the creation of the Muslim community, the role and qualities of leadership are central to the Islamic political discourse of the instructors. The passage shows that democratic ideas such as “consultation” and “representation” are actively integrated into this model of leadership. In addition, both consultation and representation are further corroborated by the values of “mercy” and “compassion”, which are prevalent in the Qurʾanic vocabulary. Here, Instructor A is making a direct association between key democratic ideas (consultation and representation) and central Qurʾanic values (mercy and compassion). The link between the two is leadership. This is one example of the way democratic ideas are actively made “Islamic”.

Nevertheless, consultation and representation appear to be attached to the notion of a benevolent leader, not institutional processes. As I showed earlier, Instructor B thought the formation of an Islamic society was dependent on the appointment of a unifying leader. The attention that is given to the role of the leader suggests that, for the instructors, the notion of leadership (a father-like authority) is to Islamic political theory as institutions and process (procedures)

are to democratic theory. In another passage Instructor A provided more details on how this leader (caliph) must be selected by a small group of elders:

> The early Islamic way … choosing the caliphate did not depend on a total democracy, rather it was the *ahl al-hal wal-aqd*, the notables of each community were consulted and if they all agreed (on) the person who'd be the caliph, after that, they went to the *masjid* where the people were informed of that the decision. Instructor A

Instructor A provided no further comment regarding what would happen if and when the notables of these communities failed to appoint a leader, nor how these notables would themselves be selected by their respective communities. These key procedural details are missing. If this issue were discussed more in depth, the institution of *"ahl al-hal wal-aqd"* might have ended up looking like an institution very similar to a parliament, where local communities elect their own leaders to represent them at a more central level of decision-making. The above attempt to reject a "total" democracy seems to reinforce the democratic values of consultation and representation.

Consultation was only promoted by Instructor A as long as it does not compromise religious laws and as long as consultation is not binding. Furthermore, he took an egalitarian stance when he explained that leaders should work at the grassroots level, not live privileged lives. In terms of leadership, he also explained that Islamic scholars should lead the *daʿwa* and that political leaders should have knowledge of the religion. As I have shown on multiple occasions, Instructor A remained consistent with his views against "personal opinion" on religious matters. However, given that religious laws regulate both sacred rituals and mundane affairs (e.g. food and farming, dress, sexual relations, trade, etc.), it is difficult to draw a line between religious laws to be followed (as direct instructions) and non-religious laws on which people (community representatives) can deliberate freely. The remit of responsibility of the leader as a result also remains insufficiently undefined. This lack of clarity means that some religious precepts take priority over others. For example,

instructors tended to put more emphasis on personal lifestyle choices and morals over other issues, such as political corruption, transparency and accountability. The earlier comparison between Instructor B and Abou El Fadl shows the same dichotomy, a focus on personal piety vs. justice and social change.

Despite the emphasis given to consultation and representation, the instructors' normative narratives function almost in a diametrically opposed way to how many people understand the changing nature of laws and norms in contemporary democratic life. They show little concern with values to do with procedures (how Muslims should make or implement decisions fairly, how Muslims should choose their political authorities, etc.) while greater attention is given to personal, moral prescriptions (substantive matters) such as rules that regulate individual behaviour and relationships. In both online courses, developing pious individuals is the only way to achieve political change. Special importance is given to public piety, such as Muslims praying openly in public, outwardly displaying a Muslim identity, excelling in professional life and building Islamic institutions of learning.

However, both Instructors A and B also refrained from talking about substantive laws in any depth. For example, Instructor B once asked his students to steer conversations about Islam away from laws and punishments and focus instead on less controversial issues such as personal piety, suggesting perhaps an ambivalent attachment to specific rules and laws. How much this ambivalence is compelled by the wider political context remains unclear; however, Islamic discourse has witnessed a shift towards shared values and principles. By looking at the historical genealogy of *maqāṣid al shariʿa* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), Auda (2008) noticed a movement away from substantive values, that is, basic individual necessities and obligations that many Muslims believe Islam came to protect, such as the preservation of Islam/faith, life, lineage, wealth and honour. At the beginning of the 1900s, scholars began to reinterpret these higher objectives to align with Western discourses on universal rights and

values, such as equality, human dignity, justice and freedom (Auda, 2008). This trend could be observed particularly in Instructor A's classes as he used language of rights and justice to interpret the life of the Prophet (Chapter 8).

One of the consequences of the lack of meaningful engagement with procedural values is the uncritical treatment of power. In the online classes, there was no discussion about the values that should guide the formation of political authority even when relevant topics were raised explicitly in the lessons. For example, Instructor B once described how both potentially repressive and autocratic processes could be considered legitimate:

> State is power, how do you get power? Could be election, coup… military. Anything can give you power, Islamic movements approve all these options. Instructor B

The instructor made no attempt to contextualise this claim further. Although he was critical of Islamic movements on many occasions, he did not problematise the idea that military coups could be considered a legitimate method to acquire power. His way to refute this claim was only indirect, as I have shown in previous chapters, by arguing that political power is founded on education, not state power. In previous chapters, I have also shown that Instructor B avoided taking sides for the sake of unity. He criticised the lack of education of those Muslims "fighting", for example, but did not label them outsiders or deviant. The lack of an explicit condemnation of military coups is another example of how Instructor B approached subjects deemed "contentious" with ambiguity and ambivalence, that is, he often made general statements so vague that they could lead students to a wide range of disparate, and even contradictory, interpretations.

Instructor B's statement ("Islamic movements approve all these options") perhaps originates from those narratives that tell how each one of the four caliphs after the death of Muhammad was selected in a differed way, for example appointed by a predecessor, by popular support, by an assembly of

notables etc. Some Muslims are of the opinion that each example provides validation for a particular method. This is the case, for example, for the founder of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (An-Nabhani 1996). Others believe that these examples show that political power is not a religious matter at all, since the Prophet clearly left no divinely prescribed method for the appointment of his successors. Instructor B sits somewhat in between these positions, he wants a leader that unifies all Muslims, yet at the same time he insists that there is no religious obligation to acquire political power.

Even though Instructor B does not delve into the practical issues related to the formation of political authority, he shows particular concern for achieving Muslim unity under one leader, by whatever means necessary. He once argued for example:

> Just make a lot, ten, twenty people put their name, take any paper, he's *amīr* (leader), simple matter, if you cannot do anything, at least do this, make an *amīr*. (Institute B)

In emphasising the necessity of selecting a leader to govern the affairs of Muslims, Instructor B conceded that working out the details that would govern the selection process was not an important matter. The excerpt above reveals a feeling of urgency and frustration with the Muslim community's inability to make collective decisions. "Making a lot" is proposed here as a last resort to unite the community. Perhaps coincidentally, selection by lot (or sortition) has roots in the ancient world (a well-known example is Athenian democracy, for example) and it has been found in pre-Islamic and Islamic history in different contexts and at different levels of decision-making. Sortition was used, for example, to avoid "preferential treatment" in the selection of delegates and officials. The practice of this method however appears to be peripheral in the context of Islamic jurisprudence (Crone & Silverstein, 2010).

As I will show below, sortition is a method of selection that is used in deliberative democracy. It has gained increasing interest in mainstream politics in the past

two decades. Instructor B’s reference to drawing lots suggests that any person (perhaps including faith leaders in the community) should have equal chances of being selected as a unifying leader. I do not know more about the initial pool of people from which the selection would hypothetically take place. Even after a student asked for more details, the instructor remained vague and gave no importance to the exact process. The length of office or the nature of the position of a Muslim leader selected by lot were not discussed further. Most importantly, it was not clear how serious about the idea of drawing lots he instructor really was, or whether the method of selecting by lot was inspired by specific Islamic traditions.

However, the context in which the instructor is operating, i.e. contemporary British Sunni Islam, suggests that the instructor is seeking to address sectarian disagreements among Muslim groups over theological and jurisprudential differences. In opposition to sectarianism, the instructor took the stance that anyone from any faction of the community could become a leader – a more or less egalitarian stance depending on how the instructor defines the Muslim community (and whether Shiʿi Muslims, Ahmadis, Qurʾanists, etc. would be included).

The two instructors, therefore, do not have a categorically negative opinion of democracy, certain democratic ideas exist to a degree in different forms. Their views about democracy are nuanced and rather ambivalent and selective. In fact, despite the great academic attention given to whether Islam is compatible or not compatible with liberal secular democracy (Pankhurst 2013), the instructors did not seem to be consumed by the same preoccupation. Overall, both instructors provided a superficial treatment of governance in general, many concepts remained undefined and most importantly there was no clarity over existing positions on a host of political ideas.

However, it is also problematic to see democracy as a panacea. Not thinking critically and creatively about democracy is as detrimental as not thinking critically and creatively about Islam. Behind the emphasis that is sometimes

placed on the legitimacy of procedures and the values that underpin them lies the assumption that democracy is a complete form of government that has internal mechanisms to “make things work”. This means that governments and society deem any criticisms of the workings or principles of democracy as dangerously “antidemocratic” or “radical”. Such assumptions can legitimise dysfunctional practices and inhibit a serious search for new forms of decision-making that are more inclusive, culturally relevant, participatory and deliberative and that address the oppressive colonial roots of the current system (Van Reybrouck, 2016). This process involves questioning existing democratic institutions, the processes and rituals, and addressing their shortcomings in order to foster the imagination of alternatives. This involves also exploring demo-diversity – the idea that there are many creative ways human societies have used to share authority (i.e. to do democracy) that do not conform to a Western pre-packaged hegemonic version of neo-liberal, representative democracy (Santos 2013).

The internet contexts that I have explored have hinted at some of these critiques, e.g. the role of spirituality and morality in the public sphere, issues of autonomy, boundaries and cooperation between different moral communities, and finally the role of different types of expertise as well as spiritual and legal traditions in the decision-making process. However, as neither substantive values nor procedural values are discussed in any depth, albeit for different reasons, the Islamic society, the forms it could possibly take and values on which it would be based are left unexplored and open to contradictory interpretations.

This demonstrates how important the role of interpretation and criticality is in the development of political discourse. The instructors’ views on democracy and the state vis-à-vis their Islamic “ideals” are informed by the methodological and epistemological positions they expressed throughout the classes. The exploration of the “political” cannot be addressed without first addressing these epistemological and hermeneutic concerns. In previous chapters, I showed how

important is to establish the way in which interpretations of religious traditions change over time, what kind of interpretative strategies can be employed to tap into this vast body of normative, cultural and historical knowledge about Islam, how people's interpretations of traditions might influence how they perceive the contemporary world and, conversely, how people's understanding of contemporary society might affect the way people understand traditions.

For both instructors, conversations about the core values that should govern the civic and political processes of an Islamic society are deferred to a later time. This lack of interest in political processes is perhaps due to a feeling of general disenchantment with the politics of existing Muslim-majority countries. As Instructor B argued once, all countries that can be defined as "Islamic" (in any way) have failed to implement any sort of "authentic" Islam. So, despite talks about the need for Muslims to unite and gain "strength" (their choice of word instead of "power"), there is no concrete intention to turn the elusive "ideal" into reality through concrete political engagement. Despite a few half-hearted criticisms of the current political system, the instructors give priority to building "Islamic foundations" through education within the secular contexts they operate in because they believe positive changes can only happen through pious submission.

9.5 Leadership, unity and the problem of "weakness"

Previously, I mentioned that the priority for Instructor B was to persuade the students that Muslims needed first and foremost to follow a *methodology of action*, which is essentially activism inspired by the Prophets' life. Instructor B's methodology consisted of three stages: *daʿwa* (education), *hijra* (separation from immorality) and *jihad* (the physical effort to realise an Islamic society). Instructor A did not have such a structured methodology as such, though he mentioned at times the importance of having a plan:

In order to call people to Islam, it requires planning methodology, he didn't just simply walk around and talk to anybody, he found out exactly who the leaders of which tribes were … and found, you know, the right moments to sit with them, and speak to them and spoke to different tribes in ways that suit those tribes according to what he knew about them. (Institute A)

Instructor A, like Instructor B, argued that Muhammad was a good strategist who would adapt his approach based on the positions of the Muslims in society. In the example above, the Muslims were strong so Muhammad as a leader was in a condition to establish ties with neighbouring tribes in an effort to solidify the presence of this new society and ensure the preservation of Islam. Instructor A's advice remained primarily at the individual level, that is, he translated the qualities found in the Prophet into personal qualities useful for *daʿwa*.

Instructor B instead talked more explicitly about the need for a collective plan. He used several examples to explain that the priority for Muslims is to devise a plan that goes beyond individual initiative. He explained that Muslims "should make an effort to move to create a good Muslim society which can help believers remain as believers; but that's not happening."

Instructor B was particularly concerned about the issue of "weakness" and "helping believers remain believers". The idea of "weakness" was a recurrent theme and not used in the same way Instructor A used the word. Instructor A used the term "weak" to refer to the oppressed, poor and disenfranchised. He gave the example of some of the first converts to Islam who felt empowered by the message of Islam in the early stages of the Prophet's mission. "Weak people" for Instructor B are those who lack a strong faith and are easily tempted by outside influences and inclined to go beyond the boundaries of the religion. This is one reason why he also wants to shift attention away from the implementation of Islamic law and focus on education and piety. He further develops the problem of "weak people" who abandon the Muslim community (or the norms of the community) in the following passage:

> Religion needs a society and also you can say a 'state', if people believe in the state ... Without a society things are very, very difficult, like in our time we *don't have a society* now … the problems are so many because when we don't have a society, it is very difficult to keep weak people with you because weak people can become impressed by anything … but when you have a society, then it is very difficult for people to leave you. (Institute B) (My emphasis)

Here, the instructor states that Muslims do not currently have a society*,* or more specifically a society built on Islamic foundations that can keep Muslims attached to their religion. This stance can be defined as communitarian because instead of emphasising individuality and freedom of choice, it gives a negative connotation to nonconformity and emphasises the need for cohesion, perhaps even insularity. Instructor B's concern about keeping the community together also recalls the tension between the promotion of individualistic values emanating from a Western worldview and communitarian values that highlight a sense of duty towards the community (Kayira, 2015). Promoting freedom to leave one's community, which includes the right to leave one's religion, can inadvertently have the adverse effect of dividing communities and in some contexts even exacerbating religious tensions (Mahmood, 2015).

Instructor B emphasises the right of communities to have their own autonomy and agency, over the autonomy and agency of individuals. This could be perhaps inspired by the idea of "millets" in premodern Islam and in the Ottoman empire. From a liberal perspective, this communitarian view can be an imposition that limits the creative potential of each individual and the search for one's "true self" and happiness. In the passage above, Instructor B seems to be calling for a society where freedom remains within the boundaries of normative Islam.

As for other concepts found in the lessons, Instructor B never provided a definition of "weakness" when he said, "it is very difficult to keep weak people with you" without a society. Students were left guessing or assuming what the instructor might mean. I interpreted "weak people" to mean Muslims who either leave Islam (apostatise) or engage in "sinful" activities associated with Western lifestyles. The definition of "weak people" remains vague, however, so it can be

interpreted in other ways. It may also refer to people who need to be protected from their own vices, people who are not deeply religious or even to subjugate whole categories of people, for example women.

Instructor B felt the need to have a society that would keep believers from “leaving”, yet at the same time he did not believe that secular states were inherently bad. He had an instrumental appreciation of secularism and what it could do for religious communities. As I showed in the previous chapter, Instructor B explained that “secular societies are not harmful”, and Muslims “can use a secular society in the interest of their religion … if they are clever and hardworking”. Because Islamic education “makes Muslims”, secular spaces give Muslims the freedom to build Islamic institutions of learning. Many secular contexts provide such opportunity freely, with relatively few restrictions. This freedom is a double-edged sword, however, as secular societies also provide spaces where criticism of Islam or practices that challenge normativity can develop. Secular society offers spaces where believers can stop being believers more easily.

Instructor B’s solution to the problem of “weak people” can be found in the figure of a strong leader. Leadership here takes again a prominent role. The instructor depicts Prophet Muhammad as a clever and pragmatic strategist. In the following passage, he talks about how the Prophet dealt with the treacheries of the tribes who were allied with the Muslims and elaborates on this notion of “weakness” in relation to leadership:

> If somebody cannot lead with the matter firmly, he never can lead all … the weakness will grow and conspiracies will grow like you can see in weak times in past (unclear) because the leader is not strong so basically conspiracies grow people apart, like household if the man of the house is not strong conspiracies will go there in the family. Institute B, Lesson 8

The leader is again presented as a family-father figure. Peculiarly, he claims that conspiracies grow within the family unit. “Weakness” here appears to be connected to the existence of “conspiracies”. A “conspiracy” suggests that

someone is orchestrating a plot in secrecy to do something bad or illegal. In this case, conspiracy means spreading rumours to cause tension and division within this Muslim family/community unit. It is also possible that the instructor is indirectly concerned with the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation on social media. Understood in the context of his concern with rigour and the responsibility of scholars (see Chapter 7), Instructor B may be making a case for leaders to instil trust between ordinary people, experts and authorities.

The concern about conspiracies also recalls Instructor A's description of colonisation in the Muslim world (Chapter 6), where he described the Western colonial efforts to disconnect ordinary Muslims from their scholars. Instructor B does not put the "growth of conspiracies" in the context of European colonialism, nor does he mention specifically what these conspiracies are and where they originate from. However, he uses this fear of controversies and division to justify a firm leadership. The image of the leader emerges as an *almost* authoritarian father-figure, depending on the way his words are interpreted. Take for example:

> The Prophet *ṣallā -llāhu ʿalayhī wa-sallam* is teaching to be firm … understand properly, we never said that Prophets don't kill people, but they don't kill people unjustly or wrongly, they don't enjoy killing people, but when the killing becomes necessary, killing becomes a cure for the problems of the society … they do it properly and firmly, though his heart is soft but they don't make the softness of their heart harm the whole society. (Institute B)

As problematic as this view may seem at first, this description is not surprising nor exceptional if we were to interpret the figure of the Prophet as any other political leader, a president or prime minister of any country. Seen in this context, Instructor B's view appears to be informed by political realism. Many Western nation states routinely engage in violence at home or and military campaigns abroad if they think the unity of the state, the values/norms agreed by the international community and/or political economic interests are under

threat. In this sense, the instructor's position on violence, as much as it is morally problematic, is part of our political reality. The key difference is that in secular contexts religion has been divorced from politics, so there is a tendency to expect Prophets to be pious and submissive, not pragmatic leaders. At times, pious people may engage in peaceful protest, but it is not generally expected of them to lead armed struggles. People, therefore, tend to react with surprise and alarm when they see the association of prophethood with the executive powers of a state.

However, the degree of vagueness about the substance of these conspiracies and the type of threats and crimes that would justify such violence make these comments particularly problematic. Instructor B mentions that leaders should not kill unjustly and only when necessary, but we do not know the nature of the crimes that would require such response. The instructor's comments are so general that any activity deemed to be weakening people's faith – a peaceful protest, a newspaper article, a satirical sketch, or a social media post criticising any Islamic position – might need to be dealt with "firmly" by a leader. Because of the superficial treatment of this serious topic, it is not possible to tell from the classroom if any of these examples fit, or do not fit, within the instructor's worldview. Fundamental details that could change the overall meaning of the instructor's comments in significant ways are simply absent from the lectures. Nevertheless, Instructor B accepts that conflict does exist and that at times such conflict may need to be managed with the use of force or violence. His political realism coexists with a more idealistic position on piety and the public role of Islamic education in the creation of a virtuous Muslim society.

Comments made by the instructors in the online classes often deal with these kinds of contentious issues, but the superficial treatment leaves plenty of space to accommodate different – if not contradictory – conclusions. This demonstrates that the way in which traditions are interpreted depends as much on the text as on the person doing the interpretation. Ambivalence and contradiction characterise the whole process of interpreting traditions

(Brockopp, 2015b), which means disparate conclusions are often reached from the same source. It is, for example, not uncommon to see the Prophet being portrayed as a “peacemaker” in some contexts and as a brave “warrior” or “military leader” in others. Therefore, it is important to read traditions critically in their full historical context. For example, war at the time of Muhammad meant often hand-to-hand or close-distance combat as part of wider intertribal relations; it had to do with skill, honour and courage. It was a more “intimate affair” (Brockopp, 2015b, p. 8) than modern warfare, which often takes place at a distance and involves a greater number of casualties and geopolitical considerations. It is not possible to draw parallels between premodern military traditions and modern warfare, or find direct applications of the former, without considering both historical contexts in detail.

The concept of peace in the Islamic tradition is also multifaceted. The Qurʾanic concept of peace symbolises the ideal, paradise. However, there are also more pragmatic interpretations of peace. Alongside examples of non-violence and peaceful resistance in the *sīra*, the Prophet also established ways of regulating worldly affairs, implementing justice and maintaining social order, all practices that differ significantly from a heavenly notion of peace (Brockopp, 2015b). It is neither realistic nor useful to expect complete coherence in a vast body of traditions. That is why a critical analysis of complex issues from an historical (rather than a purely normative perspective) can be a fruitful and spiritually enriching experience.

Overall, both instructors painted mixed pictures of their ideal Islamic society. These pictures encompass two political potentials. The “democratic potential” can be found wherever special emphasis is placed on consultation and representation, egalitarian leadership, “democratising” religious education, and respect of intellectual diversity within and outside Islam. The “autocratic potential” can be found wherever special emphasis is placed on the power of a father-like strong leader, on protecting the Muslim community from conspiracies and vices, on literalist readings of traditions that reject the role of the interpreter

and on the supremacy of scripture over other spheres of knowledge. All these elements coexist at the same time in the narratives of the instructors. When students question how these different elements come together, the need to defend Islam from the outside world often supersedes "critical self-reflection", which leaves the exploration of traditions and political ideas fragmented and incomplete.

9.6 Final observations: traditions, intellectual influences and political imagination

In this final section, I provide some context to the data presented in this Chapter and some possible explanations as to why the political ideas presented in the two online courses are often fragmented and treated cursorily.

Any attempt to give an Islamic basis to political ideas needs to be analysed in the context of the political and historical influences that contribute to their formation. In the case of the online learning I observed, the sources of political ideas were varied and complex. For instance, as well as the reported original examples of Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs, some Muslims take inspiration from the more recent example of the Ottoman caliphate, which was formally dissolved as an institution in 1924 (Enayat, 1982). References to the "Islamic state" can, therefore, imply a return to the original Islamic polity instituted by the Prophet or alternatively to the historical entity of the "caliphate" that existed in later periods in different shapes and forms (Al-Rasheed, Kersten, & Shterin, 2012).

Another influence is the heightened awareness of the experience of colonialism, the collapse of the imperial system and the rise of the international system of nation states. In this context, narratives depicting democracy as an ideal form of government that would eventually bring prosperity and stability to all nations, become commonplace. The nation state radically changes the way

people see themselves as citizens. While people once thought of themselves primarily as members of a family, town, guild, tribe and/or religious community, the nation state created a new sense of belonging and national identity, which, at least initially, came with an expectation of some linguistic, ethnic, or legal uniformity.

When Instructor B emphasises leaders as "father-like" figures or talks about the creation of a society (rather than a state), the retention of Muslims within their community or the internalisation of norms (not laws protected by a police force and courts), he is visualising a type of traditional life where national identities are irrelevant. He does this, however, without threatening the status quo of the modern state. Instructor B does not think of people as active agents of social change (a modern understanding of political engagement), which suggests that he wants to promote a consciousness where people think themselves first as members of religious family-like communities and then as citizens of a state. As I have shown in previous chapters, Instructor B is pushing back against the idea that social phenomena and even Islamic texts, must be actively analysed to find solutions to today's challenges. The instructor's view is that a better society may come if Muslims fulfil religious obligations, not by analysing society or rationalising religion. With the exception of the overarching his *theory of change/methodology of the Prophets* and the idea of "making a plan", his discourse lacks any positive reference to active engagement to produce political change. Instructor B searches to challenge contemporary theories of social change with religious practice.

However, despite their determination to revive traditional values and ideas, many neo-traditionalist Muslims commonly utilise contemporary language and meanings to express their wants and needs and, importantly, to advocate the validity of their traditions. All the Islamic orientations that exist today, operate to a degree within this modernist framework. I have noted in previous chapters that Instructor A used a scientific language to describe premodern Islamic scholarship and a language of rights and social justice to describe Islamic

activism. The same modernism plays a part in the realm of politics. For example, an international survey carried out by the Pew Research Centre in 2003 shows that at the time "overwhelming percentages of Muslims" across the globe wanted Islamic law yet the same Muslims "differed widely" on what "Islamic law" actually meant. The survey findings indicate that Muslims generally expect Islamic law to uphold the same values most people associate with contemporary Western democracies (e.g. personal freedom, welfare, etc.). Islamic law was also endorsed selectively, so, for example, while many were in favour of Islamic family and property law, fewer showed support for criminal law. The findings of this global survey concluded that support for the idea of a caliphate seemed to indicate disaffection with governments, more than outright support for "Islamic law". The "caliphate" was more like a source of inspiration "to imagine *possible alternatives* rooted in the Islamic tradition" (Al-Rasheed et al., 2012, p. 18 My emphasis). Islamic traditions are therefore employed as a source of political imagination to engage with – not simply reject – contemporary political systems.

Similar dynamics took place in the online classes. The instructors interweave historical claims about the origins of the Muslim community with contemporary values grounded in current political events, to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to discern traditional and modern influences. Imagining political alternatives is not easy. Some argue that the reality of the modern nation state seriously inhibits the potential to imagine other forms of government:

> The modern state has so ubiquitously conquered the contemporary world and imagination as to threaten all historical understanding and along with that, any historically extended and authentic alternative. (Anjum, 2019, p. 43)

This search for an "Islamic" form of government takes place in a context where many Muslims feel the need to develop alternatives to both "extremists" versions of an "Islamic state" *and* the modern model of the democratic nation state. Outside the media spotlight on the "extremist" versions of the Islamic

state that are much reviled in the public domain, thinking about Islamic political ideas can generate stimulating questions. Interesting insights can be drawn from the online classes, for example, about the role of leaders and experts in contemporary politics, the autonomy and self-determination of communities, alternative forms of activism, disenfranchisement and the hegemony of Western values and customs in the public sphere. All forms of government are inspired by religious and cultural traditions, it is how we use the traditions that counts, the methodological principles we choose to interpret them with and whether we let traditions limit or expand our imagination (depending on the political climate at any one time and place). Lack of political imagination also comes from the difficulty of thinking outside left-right party politics, which is an experience shared by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For example, Islamic positions on contemporary issues can develop in a specific direction to avoid being associated to a particular political position within the left-right spectrum. As I will show shortly, party politics is not felt as a restriction only by Muslims.

Being associated with left-wing or right-wing politics comes with a number of assumptions about one's position on many issues, such as foreign policy, gender relations, social and economic justice, religious affairs, and so on. This position is often stereotyped, though many people might not quite fit in these two categories. For example, a Muslim may lean towards the left on foreign policy and domestic economic policy and towards the right on social conservative values, e.g. marriage, abortion, work ethic and economic policy. This is one of the reasons why Instructor A sought some distance from some social justice movements and combined social justice with theological and moral "justice" (upholding God's right to be worshipped and piety, see Chapter 8).

A good analysis of this phenomenon was outlined by Yassir Morsi, the author of *Radical Skin, Moderate Masks* (2017), in a podcast in which he was responding to arguments against Muslims employing Critical Theory, an academic approach that supposedly is making young Muslims embrace "leftist"

ideologies. The very argument against this academic approach, he argued, exists because Muslims are "stuck" thinking they have to position themselves right or left. What is needed, Morsi argued, is a "truly independent position" from which the entire system of party politics can be critiqued because this system "belongs to whiteness, it belongs to colonialism" (2019). This view highlights the need to develop a "political language" outside and beyond the "imprinting" of the Western political system. This is an emancipatory, decolonial position that condemns the hegemonic nature of the Western democratic nation state. The "lack of imagination" is, therefore, caused by a system that preserves itself through the employment of mechanisms that deter the realisation of a political imagination for radical change (Sayyid, 2014, p. 80).

The urgent need to imagine new ways of doing politics in response to the challenges of representative democracy, party politics and the nation state is a shared sentiment across political movements, not a phenomenon specific to political Islam. In fact, when Muslims in Europe look at societal problems, they often respond in ways that are similar to their fellow citizens. Many people in the West are increasingly frustrated with their political systems and looking at the past to find solutions. Consider, for example, the often-heard sentiments that politicians are just elites detached from ordinary people or that regular elections "don't change anything", they are "just" empty rituals that lead to the alternation of one set of people with vested interests and privileges with another (Van Reybrouck, 2016). Regardless of how true these claims are, in response to this growing resentment, populist movements have grown to seek to address these challenges. Some populist movements rely on anti-elitist and nationalist sentiments while others are seeking ways to increase citizens' involvement in policymaking through participatory tools inspired by different traditions (what I referred earlier as "demo-diversity").

One such trend is the enthusiasm for new forms of participatory and deliberative democracy that seek to reinvent the way ordinary citizens, politicians and experts connect with each other to make policy. To face global challenges such

as the proliferation of misinformation and disengagement with democracy, practitioners are increasingly championing tools like citizens' assemblies, crowdsourcing, minipublics, deliberative polling, citizens' juries, and so on (The Involve Foundation, 2018). These deliberative and participative methods, their proponents argue, help citizens become more involved, by learning about important issues from experts, deliberating together outside the constrictions of political parties and recommending policy solutions, in an attempt to narrow the gap between decision-makers and the general public. During a recent protest in London, academic expert in deliberative democracy Graham Smith argued for the need to unleash this political imagination:

> A lot of this is about lack of imagination. So when people say we need more democracy or we need to do democracy better, they think how can we just tinker with parliament, rather than thinking actually there are new ways of doing democracy, there are new institutions. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019)

The desire to imagine political systems beyond the Western system of representative democracy, party politics and elections is, therefore, a shared sentiment across different social movements, religious or secular.

During the classes, Instructors A and B were essentially concerned with problems similar to those being addressed by advocates of deliberative democracy. They talked about the role of experts and their public responsibility to the people, they worried about the extent to which ordinary people should be able to form their own opinions or participate in decision-making on complex issues, as I discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. The foundations of these political concerns are epistemological and methodological; Instructor A and B are responding to the increasing democratisation of Islamic texts.

The instructors are providing their unique response to a shared political problem. The problem is that many people are not able to identify and evaluate reputable sources of knowledge in an online ocean of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda. In Muslim contexts, the problem is that ordinary

Muslims can read and follow opinions about what “Islam says” (regarding laws, medicine, politics, society) without any expert guidance or training. The instructors are ultimately addressing in their own way the same global challenges at the level of the Muslim “family-community unit” that they think they ought to serve.

The political solutions advocated by campaigners for more deliberative and participatory democracy are also rooted in ancient political and intellectual traditions (Ancient Greece being one), yet these solutions do not aspire to emulate the traditions they are inspired from. However revered the origins of democracy are for some, its traditions are routinely and openly problematised and reworked creatively to eventually develop into new solutions. The past needs to be simultaneously a source of inspiration, critique and dismissal. Even when the instructors dismiss aspects of past traditions while highlight others, they sometimes do not do so in an intentional, transparent, or self-reflective way. The political elements found in the online classes suggest that the question posed by the instructors is not about being “for or against” secularism, the nation state or democracy. It is about tackling the problems of the communities they serve, which includes, in addition to shared challenges, the pressing need for Muslims to be *visible* and *heard* in the public domain and maintain a connection with a long tradition of Islamic scholarship in secular contexts.

In the online classes, political considerations were the result of a mixture of influences, yet the instructors did not openly trace them or reflect upon the origins of their ideas. The Islamic online classes that I observed could be improved by giving more thought to the rich intellectual genealogy that inspires their thinking. The scholars and intellectuals who have influenced the thinking of the two online instructors were sometimes mentioned in the classes (e.g Al-Buti, Mawdudi) to reinforce the arguments being made. However, these scholars were never properly “organized” chronologically nor conceptually to trace a meaningful intellectual lineage (i.e. who influenced whom, and which

intellectual contributions changed paradigms and “ways of thinking” about Islam, society and so on). In Chapter 4, I listed chronologically the names of the scholars and intellectuals who were mentioned by name in the classes. The first author was from the 7th century and the last from the 20th century, a difference of thirteen centuries. Just consider how many specialists are needed to understand each period. Still, the instructors switched from early medieval history to modern history and referred to ancient scholars and modern intellectuals as if there were no drastic differences in approaches, contexts, and socio-economic and political conditions.

It is important for any educator who teaches history, politics and religion from a faith-based perspective to reflect on the state of the field more transparently and trace its developments more carefully. This is especially the case if the instructors want their subjects of study to be likened to other academic disciplines (something that Instructors A and B insisted on, as I described in Chapter 6) and if they want to successfully minimise the spread of misinformation. The intersection of past and present is inevitable in the formation of political ideas. However, the lack of reflection over how ideas come develop is not. This lack of self-reflection is possibly due to the epistemological stances adopted by the instructors, which were also discussed extensively in Chapter 6. The first stance is the outright rejection of subjectivism, e.g. the idea that the way we “read” historical data is influenced by our understanding of the world. When we reject this idea, we tend not to take as seriously the need to be open and scrutinise the ideological roots of our own claims. The second epistemological stance is the purpose given to Islamic education, e.g. to extract lessons and models of behaviour from the historical data that subsequently students are expected to emulate. This can also prevent self-reflection because it can lead to an interpretative gridlock when the historical model does not align with current developments in and understanding of contemporary social relations. Expecting “emulation” rather than critical insight and inspiration also adds unnecessary pressure to make claims about the past. The Islamic

education I observed online was not explorative because of this pressure. It failed to acknowledge that simply exploring historical interpretations and political possibilities (i.e. without the need to be prescriptive) *can* strengthen faith and be spiritually and intellectually enriching in its own right. The instructors' frequent shifts from past to present contribute to a conflation of normative directions with historical facts. This conflation further explains the fragmentation and incompleteness of the ideas that seem to characterise these online classes. That is why the methods employed to study history matter enormously for our collective political imagination.

Social movements have in common a desire to find solutions to the problems that the post-industrial modern world has created and failed to address through the panacea that is often assumed to be the international system of nation states and the "universal" model of liberal democracy. The current democratic, industrial and financial system has brought relative stability and prosperity in Western countries around the world (and in some Global South countries to a lesser extent), yet prosperity and stability lie increasingly self-consciously on the shoulders of colonialism, loss of cultural heritage, exploitation and deep inequalities. The concerns with the epistemological and political hegemony of the West that were expressed by the Instructors A and B in the online lessons, represent a unique take on these wider issues, which are shared by other social and political movements.

People are increasingly "compelled to think post nationally" by many global challenges, i.e. interconnected economies, multiple environmental crises, transnational social movements, mass migrations and diasporas, and social media and new technologies (Appadurai, 1996, p. 158). New information technologies have transformed the patriotism that used to be directed mainly towards one's country into many "patriotisms" that define groups based on ideas, interests, and concerns. Islamic online education is one of many of such transnational patriotisms. These patriotisms "represent more humane motives for affiliation than statehood and party affiliation and more interesting bases for

debate and crosscutting alliances” (1996, p. 176). They are an important starting point to explore traditions that can diversify, enhance, and foster creative solutions to the democratic challenges we face today – if explored openly and transparently and without the constant expectation to be normatively relevant.

Conclusions

This research project has explored the interpretative practices employed by two Muslim instructors to teach the biography of Prophet Muhammad at two online Islamic institutes identified as Institute A and B. The research process involved primarily attending online lectures, transcribing audio data, selecting and analysing relevant sections of the data set to answer three research questions. The research questions sought to explore the definition of “activism” from three intertwined angles. The first question proposed to identify the epistemological principles and interpretative practices that were professed *and* employed by the instructors in the process of defining “activism” in the classrooms. On occasions, I noted where the professed interpretative principles did not match with practice. The second research question sought to capture definitions and dimensions of activism as they were inspired by Islamic traditions as well as modern influences. Finally, the last research question sought to link the findings from the fieldwork to the wider sociopolitical context of Islam online and contemporary social movements.

The thesis has been divided in three parts: (1) literature and methodology, (2) description of themes, types, and categories, and (3) in-depth analysis of the three key concepts that emerged as a result of the selection and analysis of data in search for answers to the research questions. Part One set the stage by describing the wider context and impact of Islam and new media technologies. In this section, I also explored different Muslim responses to modern education and the modernism that to one extent or another, willingly or unwillingly, has influenced contemporary Islamic movements across the spectrum. Moreover, I have described some of the challenges and ethical concerns related to conducting research online.

In Part Two, the descriptive analysis provided an overview of the themes that emerged during the analysis, and how some themes were organised into

clusters. In this part of the thesis, I also offered examples of some of the (possibly more uncommon) connections that linked different themes to each other, for example, “activism” appearing in the same cluster as “worship”. In this section I also provided an overview of the data from different perspectives by looking at some important elements of education. As an example, I categorised how the instructors addressed their audience (as students, leaders, activists), organised the textual sources mentioned in the classes chronologically and made some comments on political implications of who we choose to cite.

In Part Three, I focused primarily on analysing relevant portions of the data more critically and in-depth. Wherever applicable, I showed how narratives were used to make statements about power, for example, by demonstrating that the online lectures sought to establish a hierarchy of knowledge. I also highlighted connections between these narratives and the wider political context anglophone Sunni Islam and tried to expand the concepts by looking at similarities with contemporary social movements in general, Islamic or even religious discourse (particularly in Chapter 9). To achieve this, I often compared statements made by Instructors A and B with contributions of prominent figures on social media accounts of other online Islamic institutes (e.g Yaqeen Institute, Usuli Institute etc.), news websites and blogs (e.g *Islam21c*, *5Pillars*, *Muslim Matters*) and podcasts (e.g Boys in the Cave). This is because I frame Islamic e-learning as an educational-activist project that takes different forms and that blends with and responds to broader Islamic and/or political debates that happen on social media more widely. These comparisons do not show how prevalent certain ideas are, as much as they may be. However, they were made to expand the analysis of concepts and ideas beyond the two case studies. As part of this process of analysis, I tried as much as possible to highlight similar patterns and differences across Islamic orientations and beyond, by including neo-traditionalist, Salafi, liberal and decolonial views (outlined in Chapter 2). Inspired by grounded theory, I have also occasionally provided examples of social movements outside of Islam for the purpose of conceptually expanding

my understanding of the data and identifying shared challenges and ideas. This was the case for Chapter 9.

This study presents four tentative findings. First, the interpretative practices employed by the instructors to extrapolate lessons and guidance from the *sīra* did not follow a predictable pattern or systematic methodology. While there were attempts to establish a general principle to discern when occurrences of the life of the Prophet should (or should not) be applied to contemporary contexts, interpretations served to reassure students about the validity of Islam, premodern scholarship, traditions and methods. The classification of these interpretative strategies outlined in Chapter 5 is an area of research that requires significantly more data collection and analysis. The data available online from such wide range of scholars and orientations provides an unlimited source of data that can help researchers obtain a greater understanding of how Muslims shift from past to present in the process of making their traditions relevant to their lives in the modern world. Developing a classification of interpretative strategies provides the foundations to explore more meticulously how important political ideas, such as activism, are defined, as I will show below.

This research also found that epistemological and methodological issues were a prominent concern of both Instructors A and B, which led me to focus in some detail on some recurrent themes that were used to express this concern. For example, in Chapters 6 and 7, I described how the instructors defined "history" and how they believed historical knowledge should be acquired, which led them to even broader discussions on the contemporary function of Islamic education vis-à-vis other types of secular education. In these two chapters, I showed how normative claims over the "proper" methods to acquire and classify knowledge and delimit the role of critical thinking and secular (natural and social) sciences gave "Islamic education" a political and civic function. In the online lessons at both institutes, the development of an Islamic worldview through Islamic

institutions of learning becomes key to developing a Muslim community, which both instructors believe to be vulnerable to Western (neo-colonial) forces.

In Chapter 8, I looked at some of the implications of conceptualising *activism as education* (and vice versa). In particular, I explored how the instructors' approach to defending Islam provided a base for conceptualising different dimensions of justice, pluralism and rights. I also described how the instructors' definition of history developed into a theory of social change that incorporates private and public expressions of piety and worship *as Islamic forms of activism*, at times, in opposition or alongside modern forms of political engagement. In addition, in Chapter 8, I developed further the definition of history provided in previous chapters of the thesis (particularly in Chapter 6), by analysing how Instructor B described human beings as having a relatively "passive" role in history, denying people's agency to assess society and change it based on empirical knowledge. He gave instead a special status to the emulation of the Prophet's customs as the primary catalyst of social change. For Instructor A, who often interpreted the Prophet's life in terms of social justice (such as working for the poor and standing up against the oppressed), I highlighted that the online lectures conveyed different dimensions of justice: one focused on establishing the truth of Islam (theological justice), piety (moral justice) and equity (social justice). I gave an account of Instructor A's conceptualisation of pluralism vis-à-vis his understanding of theological justice and how tensions between these two ideas were resolved using stories that highlight the "multiplicity of Prophets" (e.g. the Night Journey).

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this research is that both instructors, in their own ways, conceptualised activism using the Islamic notions of *daʿwa* and *ʿibāda*. *Daʿwa*, which is formally translated as Islamic propagation (inviting to Islam) and in this research context was mostly understood as educating Muslims about Islam. For Instructor A, this notion was combined with an understanding of *daʿwa* as any model behaviour of Muslims that generates a good image of Islam in wider society. In terms of activism, *ʿibāda* referred to

all those acts of worship that are carried in public and/or openly proclaim the faith (e.g. visible faith attributes). Both instructors described *ʿibāda* explicitly as an alternative to Western forms of civic and political engagement within the framework of electoral politics and a political culture of protest.

In general, Instructors A and B distanced themselves from formal discussions about the notion of the nation state, government or democracy (see Chapter 9). As I showed at different points in the thesis, political ideas were often expressed briefly and casually by the instructors, without explanatory notes or efforts to analyse the implications of these ideas in-depth. The instructors also did not discuss the ethical or political dimensions of many of the issues that were raised in the lectures, whether it was about the status of women, warfare, death penalty, LGBTQ+ rights, slavery, tolerance or pluralism in Islam, even when the issues were selected (in the case of Institute B) because they were considered contentious.

In Chapter 9, I provide a synthesis of my observations on the approach to teaching about Islam that I observed online, an approach that aims to foster a pious transformation of the individual and offer a critique of society with the prospect of building a better Muslim community/society, but that often falls short in terms of breadth and depth of analysis. During this study, I have questioned whether the ahistorical approach to teaching Islam observed combined with a palpable feeling of antagonism towards secular and/or academic methodologies should be expected in Islamic education today. I argue that by making comparisons with other realities where traditions offer inspiration for innovative solutions to the problems of contemporary society, it is possible to develop open-ended explorative forms of religious education that are critical of the past and of the present without being ahistorical. It is perhaps my background in anthropology that has led me to this analysis, but the growth of interdisciplinary Muslim Studies and the enthusiasm around Islamic education that combines traditional and contemporary methodologies indicate that there

is a desire among Muslims for an approach to Islamic education that offers spiritual engagement as well as social and historical critique.

On a methodological note, this study has problematised the idea of privacy and anonymity in online research. One of the biggest challenges whilst conducting this research was being consistent with the decision of keeping the two e-learning institutes anonymous. Without a doubt, this thesis would look very different if I had argued early on that these institutes essentially offer lectures that are available online and therefore any researcher could make use of the data without anonymising based on the assumption that these are resources that are published in the public realm. I questioned this assumption for several reasons. Technically, I thought, the video lectures may be easily accessible, but they are stored behind a registration page and/or paywall. Ethically, there are people behind the screen who have developed that content and as my communications with instructors and gatekeepers showed, anonymity was still cherished by the research participants, despite the content being online. Finally, in an online world where brands and followers are everyday currency, the idea of keeping anonymity helped me stay focused on the ideas communicated in the lectures, rather than on internet personas and personalities. Anonymity should not be sought at all costs. When studying websites and social media engagement, there are legitimate reasons for naming web addresses and internet usernames. With this study, I only want to offer an alternative position to hopefully inspire further reflection and caution when accessing online data.

This study is not without its limitations and weaknesses. There are many things that this present research project does not do. For example, this research focuses on the analysis of online classes (one entire module and a limited number of lectures for each institute) within a larger programme of study. The sample analysed in this thesis, therefore, does not reflect the whole programme of study nor the institutes in their totality. A more comprehensive long-term study of a larger data set would surely bring fresh perspectives to refine the classification of the interpretative practices outlined in Chapter 5 and further

explore the epistemological concerns of the instructors explored in Chapter 6. Further research would also help create a better understanding of how much intellectual freedom and diversity is allowed within any particular Islamic institute.

This lack of focus on intra-institutional diversity also highlights an even bigger limitation, which is the lack of face-to-face contact and limited interaction between the researcher and the instructors and/or their students. I have delved into this issue in Chapter 3. However, it is worth reiterating here that the debate over online vs. offline research raises two fundamental questions: "what can we really learn about the political and religious ideas and practices of educators who engage in Islamic education online?" and, more generally, "what can virtual research realistically expect to learn about people"? The answer to the first question, as I argued throughout the thesis, is that online environments give a unique opportunity to examine different elements of education (for example the relationship with written material, as I showed in Chapter 4) and the interpretative strategies employed in speech (see Chapter 5). However, listening to people online does not offer the full experience of *being with people*, the interactions, the gestures, the habits that come to the fore only by spending time in a physical space with someone. Even trivial observations, like the everyday objects that people own and use (books, phones, food, drink), or their dress, can enrich and inform the data collection process in interesting and unexpected ways. These observations can provide a fuller, more nuanced account of people's religious and political identity. This brings me to the second question, which is a general observation that human beings are complex and fluid and use different aspects of their identity in different contexts. Thus, different types of research can reveal different identity traits of the same people. In the case of this research, the focus on speech has given a good understanding of how epistemological and methodological concerns inform some key political ideas that are developed in the classroom.

Online research on Islamic e-learning can also develop in many directions by expanding the types of analytical tools that can be used to analyse educational provision online. It can include, for example, the analysis of visual material, which is widely used online to promote e-learning courses and institutions. The analysis of different media can significantly broaden the scope of research and bring expertise from other fields, for example, marketing and graphic design to understand the strategies used by e-learning Islamic institutes to communicate political and religious messages to Muslims. Closely related to this, there is also the need to understand the student experience, why students choose one Islamic e-learning institute over another, how they navigate different institutes and opportunities for learning (offline and online), how satisfied they are with the type of education they receive and what they expect to gain from learning Islam online. This research project does not look at how much the recorded lectures of the two instructors have impacted Muslim publics. The aim was never to quantify how many students attended the courses nor how the lectures have influenced their understanding or practice of Islam. Researching the student experience would without a doubt be a worthwhile venture.

The mushrooming of Islamic e-learning means that the microscopic analysis of lectures should be understood only as a snapshot and a starting point for further theorisation, data generation and comparative analysis. Although this research process has provided opportunities to examine how *sīra* lessons are constructed, the hermeneutic-ethnographic detail provided in this thesis makes the scope of the research limited. This study is merely a building block in the larger body of knowledge that is needed to understand how grassroots educational establishments online theorise and/or practise activism or seek to cultivate a political imagination among Muslim communities.

For this reason, going forward, this research topic would also benefit from an investigation of the wider network of relationships that characterises Islamic e-learning. This could be achieved, for example, by conducting a network mapping analysis to reveal connections between institutes at any particular

time, or even over time. This means looking for patterns of collaborations, affiliations, co-sponsorships through a website and social media content analysis of hyperlinks, citations and mentions that show support for (or opposition to) other institutions and scholars. Such network and content analysis would benefit the study of interpretative practices and hermeneutics because it can give an overview of a network associated to a particular "Islamic orientation" (described in Chapter 2) as well as relationships between these orientations. For example, doing a thorough content and network analysis of institute A's website and social media pages would generate a list of scholars and organisations associated to and/or supported by that institute. The findings from this network analysis would eventually generate a snapshot (and perhaps refine the definition) of the "traditional Islam network" described in Chapter 2. This initial map can be expanded to reveal the hyperlinks and mentions that organisations related to Institute A have on their websites. This would develop a constellation map of relationships between bigger and smaller institutes through the individuals are part of these organisations in order to develop a map of an Islamic orientation (and perhaps even neighbouring ones). Such a map would complement and even substantiate the findings from the microscopic analysis of curriculum content. A website and social media content analysis combined with the mapping of networks could also be a starting point for further comparative analysis of curriculum contents. This would provide the basis for tentative generalisations about the interpretative patterns that are distinctive of an Islamic orientation.

In this research project, I have proposed to understand Islamic grassroots educational practice essentially as a form of activism. In this sense, I frame social movements as sites of knowledge production and grassroots education as an integral part of social movements where community building and political theorising take place. In Chapter 9, I described how research on Islamic education could use this insight to develop in another, interdisciplinary direction, by looking outside Islamic studies or the anthropology and sociology of Islam.

This involves comparing these grassroots Islamic non-formal education realities with other forms of education that takes place in other contemporary social movements. As I explained in Chapter 9, social movements at their core are grappling with similar global challenges. Some of the shared concerns that I have identified are, for example, the impacts of new media technologies, increased autodidacticism, the role of public intellectuals and experts and the spread of misinformation and conspiracies in contemporary societies. Another important shared concern is the search for traditional knowledges and spiritualities to mitigate the power of Westernised, science and technology-focused political structures and the frustration with the limitations of the nation state in a world characterised by interconnected challenges.

Towards the end of this research project, I increasingly reflected on the importance of comparing interpretative practices not only within Islam (and across Islamic orientations) but also across social and educational movements, both secular and religious. It may seem strange to compare a transnational Islamic movement with a transnational environmental movement, for example. However, such comparisons provide rich material for exploration of concepts and ideas. Observing similarities and differences between movements can deepen our understanding of epistemological and methodological approaches to criticality, spirituality, and authority. The ultimate research goal is to facilitate serious engagement with Islamic traditions by understanding how epistemological and methodological positions affect, how people interpret issues that matter them and the conclusions they reach about these shared challenges (public expertise, civic participation, spirituality, traditions, political authority). Investigating these interpretative processes is essential to understand the foundations that people then build upon to conceptualise alternative ways to organise society. There is much to gain from fostering dialogue between the studies of different social movements and educational movements – religious, spiritual, secular, indigenous, academic, decolonial, Islamic and Western – and from questioning the dualistic mindset (e.g. West

vs. Islam, West vs. other) that we often implicitly assume. “Continuity” can explain better than “difference” why social movements that appear to be unrelated to one another seem to share so many concerns about common challenges. Such a premise could provide fertile ground for future research on Islamic education.

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Appendix

The tables below are discussed in Chapter 5.

TABLE A LESSONS DRAWN FROM THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE PROPHET (INSTITUTE A) THAT WERE PRESENTED *WITHOUT* AN EXPLICIT CIVIC MISSION (ALTHOUGH SOME HAVE CLEAR POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS)

Instruction/advice	Context from which lesson is drawn
Prayer is central	Prayer of fear (Salat al Khawf) during war.
Fulfil obligations towards family	Abdul Muttalib visits Muhammad The Muhammad's father accepts to be sacrificed
Avoid suspicion and backbiting Take people at face value Don't judge others	Slander of Aisha, Prophet subdues suspicions. Battle of Tabuk, Prophet takes hypocrites excuses at face value Death of Abdullah ibn Ubayy, Prophet prays over him, does not judge from outward appearance
Wife can be financially independent. Women are equal to men. Women and men do not shake hands.	The first wife of Muhammad was independent financially and proposed to him Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah, Prophet consulted his wife Umm Salama
Muslims should love their Prophet.	Celebrations upon arrival of Prophet in Medina Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah, companions' unlimited commitment to the prophet
Don't have bad intentions.	Attempted assassination by the Banu Nadeer fails

TABLE B (INDEX) CIVIC LESSONS AT INSTITUTE A

The table below shows the civic lessons extracted from the *sīra* classes at institute A with context.

Civic lesson	Context from which lesson is drawn
Activists, students of knowledge and leaders should be hardworking, economically independent, have sound work ethics (honesty etc.)	- Prophet as shepherd (L4) - Prophet as trader (L5) - Battle of the Trench (L6*)
Going into retreat can be beneficial for the leader of the Muslim community and the activist	- Pre-prophetic time - Prophet retreats on Mount Hira, source Sh. Al Buti
Boycotting is not a legitimate political tool for protest	- Boycott of the Quraysh against the Muslims
Show vigour in your worship in front of non-Muslims	- Medinan time Umma Dhu'l Qa'da – The first pilgrimage after the treaty of Udaybiyyah is agreed
Don't act like victims	Medinan time - Umma Dhu'l Qa'da
Have patience through trials and tests, in private life and *daʿwa*.	- Meccan time - Ants eat the parchment, end of the Quraysh's boycott against Muslims Prophet's trip to Tā'if for *daʿwa* - Meccan time -Prophet calls to Islam during periods of pilgrimage - Medinan time -Treacheries of al-Raji' and Bir Ma'unah - Medinan time – the Battle of the Trench - Medinan time – Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah
Help fellow Muslims, stay in congregation, must stay united	- Muhammad unites fighting tribes of Aws and Khazraj as a single brotherhood - Brotherhood between emigrants and helpers after Hijra

Benefit to the all group can overtake benefit to the individual (communitarian stance)	- Treaty of Udaybiyya; the pleas of a single convert could not be answered to respect pact that would benefit Muslim in long term
Mosques should be hubs for the community	-Building of the first mosque after emigration
There is no sin if you have a valid excuse not to help in community, donate to charity	- Expedition to Tabouk
Be balanced, avoid extremes, zealotry/fanaticism and violence	- Prophet's wisdom behind the secret phase - Beginning of open phase of daʿwa - Boycott of the Quraysh against the Muslims - Pledge of "Aqaba – prohibition to take up arms - Battle of Badr – what to do with 70 captives - Battle of Uhud – prohibition to strike women - Peaceful expulsion of the Banu Nadeer - Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah
Personal level: Develop your people's skills (congeniality), do daʿwa with good character (*akhlaq*), be easy going, be presentable/beautiful, Learn where to compromise, give leeway, teach step by step Social level (tools of engagement): Lobby and connect with people in power, organize and participate in local movements and networks for justice	- Prophet's early youth: life and work experience - Goats of Abdullah Ibn Mas'ood - Prophet's approach to secret *daʿwa* (step by step *daʿwa*) - Leaders of the Quraysh listen secretly to recitation at night and persecute during the day - Boycott of the Quraysh against the Muslims. - Choice of ambassadors to Medina: good-natured, good looking etc. - Delegation from Tā'if (L10*) - Delegations from Arabia (L11*) - Letters to ambassadors (after hijra open *daʿwa* phase)

	- Open *daʿwa* (7th AH) Khalid's conversion, people increasingly impressed by Islamic practices
Master eloquence, art of rhetoric, verbal *daʿwa*, offer a beautiful defence (make things beautiful),	- The conquest of Mecca – don't scare people, make things beautiful
Be proactive, be the first, be among the early helpers, take initiative, enact religious knowledge	- Muslim community grows, qualities of early Muslims (L7) - Conquest of Mecca -The early Muslims are better than those who converted when Islam was in a position of (L9) - Hakim ibn Izzam learns a lesson when Prophet shares wealth (after the battle of Tā'if) (L9*) - The final Hajj (L11*)
Be modest, don't seek recognition for your *daʿwa* work	- Expedition of Dhat al-Riqa' - Abu Musa Al-Ashari regrets reporting his struggles
Circles of responsibility in spreading the religion (family, community, society)	- Beginning of revelation, *daʿwa* to family first. - The two treacheries of al-Raji' and Bir Ma'unah (L4) - Open call phase: from self-reform to larger society (L8) - Ali stays home during the Battle of Tabouk (L10*) - The final Hajj (L11*)
Daʿwa is for the betterment of society	- Pledge of 'Aqaba: beginning of active *daʿwa* in Medina (L12)
Muslims must be inquisitive and do necessary research, create a step by step plan for gradual growth and engage in strategic planning and risk assessment	- Khadijah asks with her servant about potential of marrying the Prophet (L5) - *Daʿwa* during hajj delegations when Prophet was still in Mecca (L12) - Wisdom of the secret phase (L7)

	- Pre-hijra preparations (L12) - Prophet's engagement with the Christians of Najran (L11*)
Muslims should be receptive, adapt methodology to change circumstance, should never be stagnant for the cause (*daʿwa*, social justice etc.) Muslims should be innovative, excel in academia, media and communications technologies (*daʿwa*, social justice etc.) For the leaders: ability to delegate, invest in talents, invest in youth, assign people responsibilities according to abilities	- Goats of Abdullah Ibn Mas'ood (L7) - Prophet's trip to Tā'if against all odds (L10) - (Meccan phase) Prophet calls leaders during Hajj season (L11) - Muslim community grows, qualities of early Muslims (L7) - The year of delegations (L11) - The Pledge of 'Aqaba (L12) - Battle of the Trench (L6*)
Daʿwa is for all people, Islam goes beyond national and ethnic ties, *daʿwa* is global, universal	- Visit to the heavens (L11) - Ghazwa Bani al Mustaliq (L5*) - Open *daʿwa* phase (several examples) (L8*) - The passing of the Prophet (L12*)
Muslims should adapt *daʿwa* to cultures, people's interests etc.	- Adoption of the seal and innovation of the trench (post Hijra) (L8*) - Pledge of 'Aqaba (L12) - Goats of Abdullah Ibn Mas'ood (L7) - Open *daʿwa* phase (L8*) - Delegations from Arabia (post Hijra) (L11*)
Don't disturb cultures, society unnecessarily, maintain status of people before Islam	- The Pledge of 'Aqaba (L12) L12 Preparing to move to Medina L8* Open *daʿwa* phase L11* Delegations from Arabia (post hijra)
Be generous, give material gifts to those close to Islam, be welcoming in the mosque	- Giving away wealth during the battle of Tā'if (L9*) - Prophet hosted nicely delegation from Tā'if (10AH) (L10*)

Be generous for daʿwa, be welcoming at the *masjid* (mosque), give money to those approaching Islam	- Giving away wealth during the battle of Tāʼif (L9*) L10* Prophet hosted nicely delegation from Tāʼif (10 A.H.) (L10*)
Pray for the oppressors to change their way, don't curse the oppressors, forgive and overcome conflict Call for coexistence and harmony, interfaith work, peace work Respect laws of the land and the rules of universal citizenship, uphold your pledges with non-Muslims Seek peace because peace is a platform for *daʿwa*	- Prayer after trip to Tāʼif (L10) - The Pledge of ʻAqaba in preparation to move to Medina (L12) - Constitution of Medina (L2*) - Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah (L7*) - Battle of Tāʼif: Prophet prayed for their guidance (L9*) - Delegation from Tāʼif (L10*)
Avoid temptations (wealth, power, youth) Everything returns to Allah	- Muhammad as a young man (pre prophetic period) (L5) - Diplomatic offers to the Prophet (prior to hijra) (L9) - Dealing with the spoils of war after b. of Badr (L4*)
Leaders should be firm, don't negotiate with hypocrites, bad intentioned people	- Meeting with Musaylimah and masjid al-Dirar (L11*) - Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah (L7*)
Be fair, don't generalise about non-Muslims, there are many fair-minded ones who stand up for truth. Stand up for justice; speak up against wrongs in society. Leaders: Consider everyone; consult people (though consultation is not binding). Leaders should work at the grassroots level, not live privileged lives, promote	- Rebuilding the Kab'a (L5) - Responses to the boycott of the Quraysh (L10) - End to the Boycott of the Quraysh (L10) - Building of the mosque (L2*) - Battle of Badr (L3*) - Prophet's building of the Trench (L6*) - Pact of Ḥudaybiyyah (L7*) - Return of the captives from battle of Tāʼif (L9*)

egalitarianism, leaders start from themselves	
Daʿwa should be led by a scholar Leaders should have knowledge of the religion	- Beginning of open phase of Daʿwa (L8) - Delegation from Tāʾif (L10*)

TABLE C (INDEX) TYPES OF LESSONS AT INSTITUTE B

The following table shows the problematic issues addressed by the instructor at Institute B. It includes also the lessons extracted from the *sīra*, the nature of the sources and the context within the biography of the prophet.

Problematic issue	Implications/lesson	Reason	Lesson type	Context
Prophet did not have exceptional qualities predicted before beginning of revelation.	Piety more important than miracles	Logic and unreliability of early narrations (missing links, names within stories)	Personal and method	L3 Childhood and youth of the Prophet
	Piety is more important than miracles	Narrations (Abu Bakr mistaken as Prophet)	Personal and method	L5 Arrival in Medina after Hijra
We do not have authentic details about the life of the Prophet before the hijra	Test sources, be precise	Narrators were not witnesses	Method	L5 During Hijra
Prophets do not disturb society unless commanded	Personal piety Focus on prayer Importance of family	Unspecific narrations	Personal	L4 Early prophethood (Mecca)
Opening of the chest might not have happened twice	Belief	Logic and unreliability of early narrations	Method	L3 Childhood and youth of the Prophet
Obligation of prayer	Importance of prayer Personal piety	Narrations	Personal	L7 Night journey

Seniority of Abu Bakr (because he was appointed to lead prayer during Prophet's illness), Umar and Uthman (the second and third caliphs)	Prayer is the most important thing	Narrations (appointment of Abu Bakr during Prophet's illness) Source: Izalat al-Khafa'an Khilafat al-Khulfa by Waliullah	Civic	L8 Farewell hajj
Stones did not prostate to the Prophet	Belief in monotheism (*hanafiyya*) People are required to *think*, not follow blindly	Logic and unreliability of early narrations	Method	L3 Childhood and youth of the Prophet
Muslim movements focus too much on debates over the caliphate and too little on Judgement Day	Focus on piety	Narrations (Prophet simply said 'save yourself from the fire')	Personal	L4 Early prophethood (Mecca)
Methodology of prophets is *daʿwa*, *hijrah* and *jihad*	Follow correct procedure (methodology) and plan a strategy to make a Muslim society (or a state if you believe in a state) to retain weak people (those who are susceptible to outside to	Life of prophets	Method and civic	L5 Preparation to Hijra L8 Concluding remarks

	societal influences).			
	Islamic movements make mistakes in methodology (either stuck in Mecca or start from Medina without the foundations)	Entire biography of Muhammad		L8 Concluding remarks
	Never relax, keep thinking, be open minded about strategies, never stop making an effort.	Entire biography of Muhammad		L8 Concluding remarks
Meccans' trust in Muhammad as man but not as a Prophet is not a contradiction	People set different levels of trust on people depending on the identity claimed e.g. Pakistani scholars who enter politics may be trusted as religious man but not politicians	Unspecific narrations Logic	Civic	L5 Preparation to Hijra
Prophet made a safe journey to Medina	Stay safe, don't solely rely on God without taking	Unspecific narrations	Civic	L5 During Hijra

	precautions, be a slave			
Prophet did not leave Mecca with the intention of establishing a state Prophet was forced to leave Mecca	Argue against writings of political Islam Learn and follow correct procedure (methodology of the prophets)	Narrations	Civic	L5 During Hijra
Prophet and army left for battle not for caravan	Historical accuracy	Problems with logic in narrations, Narrations are contradicted by Qurʾan (Maulana Farahi, b. 1963)	Method	L6 Battle of Badr
The justification for attacking the caravan is that you're cutting supplies to the enemy	Rules of war are similar now and then	Logic	Methods	L6 Battle of Badr
There is no evidence that the night journey happened on the 26 of Rajab	Belief Possibly consequences for the celebration	Unreliability of early narrations Only reliable narrations in Bukhari	Methods	L7 Night journey
Why did the Prophet not recognise other prophets in the heavens?	Belief	Inconsistencies between accounts	Methods	L7 Night journey

As soon as he arrives in Medina, the Prophet builds a mosque	The survival of Muslims is connected to religious revival (i.e. the existence of a place of worship)	Unspecific narrations	Civic	L5 Arrival in Medina after Hijra
Companions made sure to fight people of their own standing, nowadays people are happy to fight those who are weaker	Companions are a good example	Narrations	Civic	L7 Battle of Badr
Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah gave the space/time to improve/build the people, to create alliances and acquire a position of power.	Do not insist on justice from the beginning. Recognise your position/status (weak or strong) and behave accordingly.	Narrations	Civic	L8 Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah
Prophet killed *Banu Qurayza* to stop harm being made to society	Do not say ‘prophets don’t kill’, we say ‘prophets don’t kill unjustly’. Leaders should be firm otherwise conspiracies grow.	Unspecific narrations	Civic	L8 Battle of the Trench/ Khandaq

Prophet reformed the pilgrimage before performing the farewell hajj	Reform practices that deviate from truth	Unspecific narrations	Civic	L8 Farewell hajj