"She taught me how to do it properly": Religious practices in Muslim sister relationships

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Abstract

Within studies on gender, family and religion, parent-child religious transmission continues to be prioritized. As a result, other family relationships such as siblings, and in particular sisters, remain invisible to this social process. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with a small diverse group of Muslim women were who identified as sisters, this chapter focuses on how sisters impact everyday religious practices such as prayer and wearing the headscarf. Lateral and vertical intersections in being an eldest sister are also explored along with dynamics of comparison and respectability. By looking horizontally, this paper foregrounds the mutual shaping of sister relations and religiosity, developing a new direction in the sociological study of gender and faith within families.

Introduction

Within research on families and religion, parents have been key figures of study and often viewed as central to religious socialization. In Christian traditions, parents have been viewed as influential to their children's religiosity.[1] In research on Muslim childhood, socialization into religion was mainly from parents.[2] Atheist parents have also had a hand in shaping their children's beliefs and practices, sometimes encouraging their participation in religious activities.[3] Grandparents have been studied too, with scholars noting their importance in passing religion on to grandchildren.[4] Among sociologists, a focus on vertical socialization into religious commitments, identities and practices has been predominant.

However, what about siblings, and more specifically sisters? Sociologists have shown the impact of horizontal ties between siblings (i.e., biological, adopted, step, chosen) on shaping opportunities, identities and value formation.[5] The strength of siblings is their capacity to be unique while still being part of a dyad or group.[6] Sisters and brothers typically spend less time with their parents than they do with each other, and their relationships usually last longer. Van Beekum observes that it is not from parents that one differentiates but from siblings.[7] Parents have a vital role, but siblings crucially inform one another's development, identity and life path. Sisters and brothers are typically researched together, with few studies offering a sociological and gendered analysis of adult sisters. Mauthner's research is an exception.[8] Her study uncovered sisterly ties in families, which are vastly overlooked compared to feminist sisterhood. Likewise, Muslim sister-familial relationships remain in the background compared to research on Muslim women's participation in activism and mosques.[9] Mauthner examined the ways in which sister relations inform feminine subjectivities and the power relations that happen between sisters via "motherly sistering" and the "shifting positions" they move in and out of over the life course.[10] She also explored how relationships between sisters transform through various life transitions such as marriage, divorce and bereavement, influencing aspects of closeness and distance. Mauthner argues that sisters are often invisible because they are embedded in the ordinariness of everyday life and less remarked upon compared to the mother-daughter dyad.[11] Further, biological siblings are under-researched for their impact on religiosity and religious practices in families.

A small body of research is, however, beginning to emerge. In an American context it was noted that religiosity could be positively experienced in relation to increased communication between siblings.[12] Eldest siblings in Turkey are significant in religious socialization, with research describing the influence they had on their younger siblings.[13] Adult

women in England reported that their relationships with their sisters could maintain a sense of connection to their religious heritage that was a part of their family histories.[14] While some sisters had kept, given up or taken on other forms of religion or spirituality, having this link with and through their sisters could contribute to shared rituals, memories and intimacy. Siblings can also help each other navigate and negotiate religious difference experienced in contemporary British society, becoming barometers of social and religious change.[15] Sisters and brothers are, moreover, under-studied for the ways they can influence and/or keep religious practices alive throughout adulthood.[16]

This chapter expands the research on siblings and religion by analysing the interviews of women who identified as Muslim and as sisters. Participants discussed imparting knowledge to and learning from their sisters about matters of faith such as how to pray, fast and wear the headscarf. The women also revealed that, while sisters encouraged and modelled religious practices, such dynamics were not without conflict and tension. Gender and power could play a role in the enactment of religious practices, shedding light on the intersection of lateral and vertical axes, and notions of respectability. These influential Muslim sister ties though are hidden from view because of the focus on "the hypervisibility of Islam" within "public and academic discourses."[17] More broadly, religion lived between sisters has often been overlooked. The findings presented here highlight the importance of a lateral vantage point in order to interrogate the mutual shaping of religion and sibling ties, offering a new direction in examining faith, gender and families.

Theoretical Focus and Methods

The 'lived religion' approach frames this research.[18] Lived religion takes into account the ways in which religion is lived beyond official religious institutions and how religion is practiced in ordinary unofficial spaces such as contexts of work, leisure, education, home or nature: for instance, the act of reciting The Lord's Prayer from the Christian tradition whilst washing the dishes. McGuire asks sociologists to think about religion "at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted and often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those [that] religious institutions consider important."[19]

Lived religion considers how religion is embedded in the everyday. It also pays attention to religious practices. Practice "emphasizes embodiment, habit, and daily activity."[20] In thinking about religious practices, some contend that "they are activities that are intentionally articulated or acknowledged by religious groups," while others who take a lived approach do not view religious practices as distinct from other kinds of living or social life.[21] Orsi argues that "'religion' cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life."[22] Thus, practices – including religious ones – are imbued with power in day-to-day contexts such as family, employment and education and intersect with the structuring effects of gender, class, age and race. Religious practices are not neutral. They are social acts that are individual and collective and are not separate from power relations. Some argue that everyday religion opens up the opportunity to examine power and that which the dominant gaze can ignore.[23] Similar to a feminist standpoint, the lived religion approach asks "what more there is to religion: whose lives, experiences and associational forms are being overlooked?"[24]

In examining Muslim women who identify as sisters, their relationships and everyday religious practices are often invisible because they are in the shadow of "the dominant ways in which Muslims and Islam are depicted and represented in the Western imaginary."[25] It is the "public religious practices, Islamic political activism and institutionalised, public or semi-official expressions of Islam' that are studied, discussed, made visible."[26] The women in this research are away from the public gaze even though they discuss living with/in and encountering it, for example in relation to the wearing of the headscarf. As in Jeldtoft's study,[27] the women in this research are brought into focus because they are living their religion at the

micro-level. It is in the micro-processes of everyday life that, "[b]eing a Muslim is not just something that you are, but also something that you *do*."[28] The issue of doing is "doing Islam," practicing it in one's daily life,[29] amid the routines of home, family, work, school and so forth. Just as Morgan[30] and Finch[31] describe "doing family" as an "active, regular, everyday process," likewise religion. Further, as Stirling and colleagues[32] and others argue,[33] lived religion has largely been studied in relation to "Western individuals, often in Christian contexts." This research expands the study of lived religion to bring in voices of Muslim women situated in Britain.

Complementing the theoretical approach of lived religion is a feminist approach, that centres on women's lived experiences of being a sister and in a sister relationship(s). It is often the case that men's accounts of being a brother, part of a brotherhood, or fraternity are more prominent in the public sphere, with stories of sisters and sisterhood less prominent and confined to the private sphere.[34] "Feminists are particularly concerned with getting at experiences that are often hidden."[35] The research presented here on Muslim women is part of a bigger study that has included Christian women who identified as sisters and in a sister relationship(s).[36]

In what ways do sister ties influence religious practices and identities and in turn, how do these affect relations between sisters? To investigate this question, a sample of ten adult women who identified as Muslim and as sisters were recruited through known informants. The research took place in 2016. The women were an ethnically diverse sample self-identifying as Pakistani, African, Arab, Saudi Arabian, Egyptian, Indian, Sudanese and of Mixed Arab and African descent. All lived in Britain at the time of the interviews, were university educated and employed. Islam was investigated because of the growing population of those identifying as Muslim. According to the last UK Census,[37] the number of those who identified as Muslim increased from 3% in 2001 to 4.8% in 2011, with the highest proportion of Muslims living in London, 12.4%, where the interviews took place. The ages of the participants were between 26 and 51 years-old. Because of the small sample of participants, the study is not representative.

Qualitative methods were employed to gather the women's perspectives. This involved an individual interview and drawing a family diagram and timeline. For the purpose of this chapter, interview data will be the foci of discussion as themes about religious practices emerged from this particular data. While there are different denominations within Islam, the focus here is not on these variations but on the co-constitution of faith practices (e.g., prayer and wearing of the *hijab*) and closeness between sisters. The interview questions asked women about their family histories and religious trajectories, if religiosity influenced sisters' sense of closeness and distance with each other and the kinds of religious practices they engaged in and how these were part of their sister relationships. Individual interviews were conducted as opposed to interviewing sisters together because of sensitivity to difficult issues and discomfort that might have arisen. Ethical approval was granted through my University's Faculty Ethics Committee. The interviews were analysed through a process of coding, whereby answers to each question were analysed to create general codes and then line-by-line coding was applied to create more specific codes and draw out analytical themes. This chapter focuses on two overarching themes, namely, practices of prayer and wearing the headscarf or *hijab*, as well as intersections of lateral and vertical ties that could result in comparison and power relations between sisters. The women's voices as a whole are represented, but some women's stories are more prominent, exemplifying themes from the data

Sisters' Influence on Praying and Wearing the Headscarf
Within the home, mothers and fathers facilitate religious transmission. However, for many of the women interviewed, their sisters were a key source of religious modelling and support. Eshaal (age 32), who identified as Pakistani and the eldest of two sisters in her family, said,

"We encourage each other, not necessarily in a vocal way, but if I'm praying and she sees me, then she'll pray too. Or if she starts praying and I see her, then I think I should or will too." On fasting during Ramadan, she said, "I tend to fast throughout the whole month and [if] she's doing the same thing then we spur each other on." Despite being taught the ways of Islam by their mother, Eshaal described a lateral shaping of religious practices through her sister: "Especially when it came to Mecca [or *hajj*], the two of us did it together, with my parents. If I was being a bit lazy [about the *hajj* rituals], she would say to me, 'Come on, you're here,' and encourage me, and vice versa." Even though Eshaal was the eldest, she was influenced by her younger sister's support and commitment to Islamic practices. In this sense they are both "active agents who are mutually influential" on each other's religiosity.[38]

While women discussed influencing and being influenced by their sisters with regards to prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, their sisters were also important in teaching each other how to wear the headscarf. Mahira (age 27), who identified as Arab and was younger than her eldest sister, said that her sister taught her how to wear the *hijab*: "She taught me how to do it properly." Wearing the headscarf was often a point of similarity among sisters. In Kamal's (age 29) family, she and her sisters, who were of Arab Egyptian heritage, wore the headscarf, and her mother started wearing it later on in life. Alima (age 32), who identified as Saudi Arabian, saw it as a point of difference at one point in her life between herself and her younger sister: "When she was young, I couldn't understand why she wanted to wear it." Now they both do, and her sister says Alima is "not fashionable enough with it," alluding to the proliferation of *hijabi* fashions.[39] Several of the women who chose to wear the headscarf or not were supported by their sisters. Liyana (age 51), who identified as a Pakistani and the youngest of three sisters, explained her experience:

> Within my own nuclear family, I don't wear the headscarf. In my extended family, my eldest sister always wears a scarf on her head when she goes out somewhere. My middle sister [for a number of years] wore the hijab, but then she decided 'this doesn't add anything to me as a Muslim; I can still be a good Muslim without wearing a scarf on my head.' So now she doesn't wear it either … And I was okay with that.

All three sisters came to their own decisions about the headscarf and were supportive of each other's practices. Song, who has conducted research on mixed-race sibling relations, argues that, "In Britain, Muslims constitute the main spectre of the 'other',"[40] and hence even among siblings, "their understandings of who they are must constantly be negotiated in relation to the norms, discourses, and politics surrounding them in the wider society."[41] In light of this, siblings who took varied approaches to religion could find another sibling's devout commitment to Islam problematic.[42] While Liyana was aware of how the religious practice of wearing the headscarf among Muslim women could be viewed by those outside her community, she and her sisters very much took their own approach, one that was a "personal decision" that should have "nothing to do with anybody else." In some ways, Liyana's stance could be interpreted as being influenced by the context in which she finds herself, being able to exercise her own religious practice in a society that allows for different religious expressions, and her family and sisters also reflected this attitude.[43] The *hijab* is one way in which Muslim women work out social and religious identities in relation to non-Muslims and their families.[44] It can also be a transitional tool in which women mark and renegotiate their religious practices and identities. The varied headscarf practices among Liyana and her sisters correspond with Bilge's perspectives on religious agency and the veil.[45] Choosing to wear the headscarf is not a binary between subordination and resistance but one that encompasses multiple positions. These are implicated in socio-historical processes and power relations, as well as in symbolic and material realities that intersect with social structures of gender and race. Just as the sisters

chose different positions in relation to the headscarf, religion, too, is not lived out the same way by all sisters. There were different religious identifications among the women, but sisters nonetheless had an impact on their practices.

Vertical and Lateral Axes Intersect
From a lateral vantage point, sisters encouraged each other in religious practices. Yet, sister ties could be lived along both lateral and vertical axes in which sisters negotiated responsibility and friendship, closeness and comparison. Within many Muslim families, the eldest sister is expected to help with and enact caring and domestic responsibilities. Sisters are viewed as integral to the transmission of cultural and religious practices and in home-making.[46] Mauthner describes this process of caring between sisters as "motherly sistering."[47] Sisters experience "mothering work [as] a specific attribute of femininity [which], combined with gender location in the institution of the family and family power relations make it difficult to renegotiate caring roles."[48] Because many expectations rest on the eldest sister in Muslim families, there can be little renegotiation of this role and its motherly sistering qualities. Kamal was the eldest of two sisters in her family. She offered motherly religious guidance to her youngest sister:

> I always make sure that my baby sister doesn't miss out on her prayers. She started noticing that I do my prayers, but my middle sister doesn't. When my Dad told her off for missing a prayer, she would say 'Why are you telling me off and not telling her off?' She's looking up to me as the one who's practising and looking up to my other sister as the one who's not practicing and suddenly, she thinks, 'People cannot practise and still be fine.' I didn't want her to get to that point and so I started getting involved.

In this excerpt Kamal described the positive aspects of motherly sistering which are being "caring, nurturing, protective and responsible for."[49] She provided lateral religious support to her youngest sister when the parental teaching from her father led to conflict. Yet, the relationships Kamal had with her sisters revealed that being the eldest and taking on motherly sistering was not the same or straightforward with both sisters. With her youngest sister she was able to enact this role more easily in relation to religion. But with her middle sister, because they were close in age and compared for a range of things, Kamal found a way to renegotiate her motherly sister role to keep their relationship intact.

> Practising day-to-day, my sister is not the best person, but everybody has those times. I was better at practising daily prayers and all those things. I believe that was the main problem, conflict between her and my Dad all the time. He would always say 'Why don't you pray five times a day, your sister is doing it, why is it so difficult for you?' … My Dad was always fighting with my sister about not practising properly and he always compared us, and I didn't want that to become a war between us.

As the "responsible one," Kamal was good at school and good at practising her faith. While she was expected to be a role model for her middle sister when it came to religion, she did not want this to tear their relationship apart at home. It was enough to be compared in their schoolwork, without their religious life making it harder. She downplayed the importance of being a religious teacher as the eldest daughter and sister and instead shared a close relationship with her middle sister that involved sharing clothes, shopping and social activities. It can be observed from Kamal's experience that lateral and vertical axes intersected. Her experience also revealed that as the eldest she could reproduce and disrupt forms of power both placed on and expected of her. She resisted vertical expectations by shifting her position with her middle

sister. Similar to other women's interviews, Kamal, as an eldest sister moved between parental and peer-like sisterly relations amid structures of religion and gender in the family.

Further, the act of comparing siblings can be a way in which power operates within families. Parents compare children, and siblings compare parents and each other. Such dynamics can contribute to siblings disclosing or withholding information from each other. In this research, sisters noted that they did not always feel comfortable telling their sisters things. Often religion intersects with notions of respectability that are defined through feminine comportment and presentation, family honour and sexual morality, which in turn cultivate familial and social acceptance.[50] Respectability and religion can operate together between sisters, acting as a "moral compass" for appropriate behaviour, something Eshaal explained when she spoke about her relationship with her younger sister:

> Well, I think that my friends won't judge me but my sister may, and I think maybe religion has a part to play in that because sometimes there are things that you've done which you don't necessarily think you should do from a religious perspective, or you're not particularly proud of. I'm more likely to feel less comfortable talking to my sister about those things, because we share that similar upbringing. We share those similar values and those morals. So, she's more likely to say to me, well, you were brought up not to do that. Or that goes against whatever … I have very few Muslim friends. So that's why in my friendship circle, religion doesn't come up. They know I am Muslim, and they know there are certain things like my behaviour, what I do and don't do. That's fine. But it's never a topic of conversation or discussion. Whereas with family, it's different, especially with my sister, we've been brought up quite close with one another, and so she's more of a moral compass when it comes to these things.

Because of the intersection of morality and religiosity, Eshaal found it easier to disclose some things to her friends rather than her sister. In previous research with Christian women about sexuality and church life, some found it easier to talk to friends who were outside of their faith communities, than to members of their families or religious communities, about topics such as dating, sexuality and other experiences.[51] This was because of fear of judgement and a sense of surveillance by their religious peers and families that can be felt externally and internally. Similar to Christian women, Green and Singleton[52] found in their research on 'safe and risky spaces' in the lives of young South Asian women that Muslim women safeguarded their reputations and moderated their behaviour in public in order to manage and maintain respectability. Female family members can also perform a pivotal role in scrutinising women's behaviour. Thus, sharing in private what one did in public with one's friends could feel risky as Eshaal alludes to. From Eshaal and others' experiences, the intersection of religion and respectability can be a way in which Muslim women survey and engender an acceptable position within their families and the wider community.[53]

Over the life course, power relations between sisters can emerge and shift because of "different ages, birth order, education and work trajectories and marital and mothering statuses."[54] Vertical and lateral positions between sisters can change depending on time, place and social circumstance. Elements of closeness, comparison and respectability also play a part. Thus, the power and relational dynamics evident between sisters are an uneven social process.

Conclusion
Muslim women who identify as sisters are important figures in the transmission of religious traditions and practices. Sisters nurture each other in the religious rituals of prayer, fasting and other customs that are part of Muslim life. In talking to women about their adult sister relationships, they revealed how their religious practices continued to have a place in their

relationships and contributed to feelings of closeness. Chaya (age 26), who identified as Indian and as the middle sister, said, "Religion is definitely part of what makes us close … It is nice having someone to go home with and dissect the sermon with." Yameena (age 39), the eldest of her sisters and of Pakistani heritage, stated, "We do a lot of religious and faith-related talk with each other … It would be different if we didn't share the same faith. It plays a huge part in our relationship." However, sister relationships were not without conflict and sometimes religion could be seen as a source of aggravation. The women discussed the power relations that can exist between sisters. Sisters could be supportive but also act as surveyors of one another's behaviour that can be part of the expectations of religiosity and femininity embedded within families.

Muslim women's sister relationships demonstrate that religion encompasses various activities and habits and these counter the view that religious practices are "most meaningfully" done and administered within institutionalized contexts and gatherings.[55] Rather, sister ties are where one can observe and understand the mutual shaping of religiosity and lateral relations. The study of the micro-processes of Muslim sister relations expands the research of everyday lived Islam. Examining sister relations at this level "does not take for granted a *priori* identity of being a Muslim or to emphasize the 'intrinsic Islamic nature' of Muslim life."[56] This research brings into view other dynamics involved in living out one's everyday life as a Muslim. These are family, gender, the body, emotions, social life and the spaces of home and neighbourhood. For several, one's life of faith is not a linear trajectory but one of twists and turns. The women who were interviewed revealed this in their decisions to wear or not wear the headscarf, taking it off when they got a new haircut or when exercising and doing sport; how often they prayed such as being more devout to not practising as much as they wanted to; to the kinds of faith activities they were involved in, which could all vary over a lifetime. As Mahira said, "Islam is different in every household." It is also lived within a Western context where despite Christianity having declined and secularization increased, religions and spiritualities are experienced and practiced in multiple ways. Islam is lived moreover amid contemporary social and political worlds that can seep into daily faith practices.

Levels of closeness and communication between sisters can vary over the life course because of parenting, caring responsibilities, marriage, a death in the family and so forth. Despite the ebbs and flows of sister relations over time, there is much to learn from their laterality. The principal contribution of this research is its interrogation of the intersection of lived religion and feminist research on religion and gender, revealing hidden, intimate aspects of women's lives. Mitchell argues that many forget how important siblings are to social histories of families, with sisters often tasked with taking care of younger siblings, thus having a profound impact on the psychodynamics of other social groups.[57] Such histories of women's lives often go unnoticed or are taken for granted. Bringing a lived religion and feminist stance to this research means that the micro-processes of Muslim women's sister relationships are brought into view. They reveal the intragenerational and intra-religious impact of intimate faith ties on women's lives, and demonstrate how these are navigated against a backdrop of social and religious change. The lateral vantage point of sisterly life – its change and continuity – offers the studies of gender, family and religion a new direction.

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