



Meat and Islam: How Vegetarians in Egypt Navigate Faith and Contemporary Food Ethics

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Meat and Islam: How Vegetarians in Egypt Navigate Faith and Contemporary Food Ethics

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion
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Abstract

Meat is an important feature of culinary traditions across Muslim communities globally. As the central focus of Islamic dietary laws, halal meat consumption functions as a marker of Islamic communal identity, and is a distinct demonstration of faith. Explicit and divinely-decreed teachings found in the Qur'an underpin the imperative for a Muslim to consume licit meat. This study investigates how vegetarian and vegan Muslims living in Cairo, Egypt situate and justify their dietary practices within their own belief systems. It was hypothesized that Muslim vegetarians must navigate their foodways within both spiritual identities and cultural context, and reconcile abstention from meat with the traditions, beliefs, and expectations of families, immediate social circles, and the wider, global, Islamic community, as well as a meat-positive culinary tradition, ritual Islamic sacrifice, and the divinely-permitted consumption of meat in Islam.

Using a qualitative approach grounded in lived religion theorization, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with vegan or vegetarian Muslims in Cairo, delving into the micro-level of personal belief and practice, and the macro-level of cultural and social context and "official" religion. Concurring with scholarship, consumption of halal meat indeed emerged as a significant praxis of Islamic identity. Responses indicate, however, that regardless of one's interior beliefs, a vegetarian living in a Muslim culture is compelled to engage with Islam, both as an argument to legitimize a vegetarian foodway, and to maintain an outward Islamic identity. Participant conceptions of what actually

renders meat halal, as well as the essence or purpose of ritual sacrifice, point to a reconfiguration of Islamic cultural norms. Crucially, this study indicates how lay Muslims are engaging with a re-interpretation of traditional Islamic discourse, where what one eats is contextualized in the modern food production system, with particular attention to ethical issues tied to industrial animal agriculture including animal welfare, the environment, and social justice.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

So when I started to open up with my family members and friends about being vegan the first thing that they say is "meat is Halal, you don't know better than God, you can't be Muslim and vegan." I'm kinda confused but at the same time I wanna know how you guys deal with comments like this. --Facebook post, "Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt"

'If we weren't meant to eat meat – surely it wouldn't have been mentioned in the Holy Qur'an,' said my cousin. Someone else agreed, reminding me that abstaining from certain foods like pork and alcohol is explicitly mentioned, so why not all meats 'if they were really bad for us?' ... 'It just doesn't make sense. Muslims can't be vegan.'
--Nada, blog post, *One Arab Vegan*

Research Problem

More so than ever, food is intertwined with the “real” everyday spiritual lives of individuals and communities as with the “ideal” of institutional religions. Modern day anthropogenic stresses as relates to food “carry implicitly religious dimensions:” issues of climate change, food security, intensive agriculture, and genetically modified foods (GMOs) demand an interpretation in the context of religious tradition, and implicate the role and responsibility of religion in the political and social spheres (Jenkins 70-1). Food and diet has become a modern obsession; the “cult of healthiness,” with the quest for longevity, thinness or a “fit” physique, and “clean eating” “has been characterized as modern Western culture's new religion” (Lindeman and Sirelius 175). Food has been situated within a moral hierarchy, depending on the diet: Paleo, ketogenic, plant-based, raw foodism; foodways dedicated to organic/non-GMO ingredients, gluten-free, and

locally-sourced. Certain foods are deemed inherently good or bad, with diets promising weight loss, youthfulness, freedom from illness, or cure from disease. As one blogger puts it, “Give us this day our daily bread (Matthew 6:11)... as long as it’s gluten free” (Frankel). Food has been a materialist and gustatory pursuit, an indulgence and a fundamental human need that has been imbued with the sacred across time and cultures.

Vegetarianism, while at times a religiously-advocated practice, as in some strains of Buddhism or Hinduism, is typically conceptualized as an individual food choice, being driven by personal health concerns, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. However, food and eating habits are ultimately indivisible from one’s social and cultural context, to the extent that acts of consumption are often shared experiences, informed and bounded by local culinary traditions, family customs, economic access, and religious proscriptions. In Egypt, meat is a standard feature of everyday meals, as well as focal point of Islamic dietary laws. Consumption of halal (permitted) meat is encouraged and celebrated in Islam, with ritual slaughter and the distribution of meat to charity a significant expression of faith. How, then, can an Egyptian vegetarian or vegan Muslim adopt and sustain an alternative foodway that is not only counter to mainstream cultural tradition and the dominant state religion, but also opposed to traditional interpretations of Islamic dietary practices?

In this thesis, I will focus on Muslims living in present-day Cairo, Egypt who have chosen a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, and investigate how they situate and justify their dietary choices within their own religious frameworks. The purpose of this study is to investigate where these individuals locate themselves in relation to the international discourse on vegetarianism and food ethics, their native cultural food

traditions, and Islamic dietary foodways, both in global discussion and in the Egyptian context. While some vegetarians initially transition for health reasons, studies show that the majority of vegetarians cite ethical reasons of animal rights and welfare or environmental concerns for their conversion, and even health vegetarians tend to add such reasons later in their narratives. Such ethical reasoning, however, often stands opposed to classical Islamic interpretation of the hierarchy of creation, humans' right to the use of certain animals for food, and the divine commandment to enjoy and partake of all things God has made lawful, including meat. The conscious choice to abstain from meat and/or other animal products thus illuminates larger issues considered by contemporary Muslims regarding faith, ethics, and identity.

This research is driven by the following questions: how do Muslims in Cairo, Egypt frame, adapt, and justify their choice to be vegetarian or vegan within their Islamic faith? What are the implications of such a divergent food practice on relationships within the family and among friends and the wider community? How do Muslim vegetarians negotiate the ethics and morality of the religiously-sanctioned consumption of meat and sacrifice of animals in Islamic tradition in relation to their own spiritual frameworks?

A growing population of Muslim vegetarians and vegans exists on an international scale. From dedicated Facebook groups, news articles about Islam and vegetarianism, Muslim vegan bloggers, and online Islamic forums with posted questions seeking guidance from fatwas (Islamic religious rulings) regarding being Muslim and vegetarian, it is clear that there are salient and relevant discussions happening amongst vegetarian Muslims globally. There is also considerable heated

debate about whether or not one can be Muslim and vegetarian or vegan, with passionate arguments on both sides, citing specifically religious and textual justifications. It is my hypothesis that Muslim Egyptians must likewise navigate alternative dietary choices within both their spiritual identities and their cultural context, reconciling their foodways with the traditions, beliefs, and expectations of families, their immediate social circles, and the wider, global, Islamic community, as well as a meat-positive culinary tradition, ritual Islamic sacrifice, and the licit, permitted consumption of meat within Islam. Whether their choice to become vegetarian is spiritually induced or not, these individuals are compelled to come to terms with how being vegetarian “fits” with being Muslim, and to offer religious justifications to those who would challenge their choice on Islamic grounds.

The methodological framework for this research uses an ethnographic approach, consisting of in-depth interviews with Egyptian Muslim vegetarians and vegans. All research and correspondence took place in Cairo, Egypt. The primary participants are self-proclaimed Egyptian Muslim vegetarians and vegans. I also surveyed the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” and “Plant-based Diet (Egypt)” Facebook pages to analyze and compile the common discussions and challenges as relates to religious issues faced by its members.

As of this writing, no singular academic work has been done on the emergence of vegetarianism and veganism among Muslims, let alone a targeted study in a Muslim-majority culture. Scholarship has focused on vegetarianism primarily as a Western phenomenon, and as such has considered this foodway through more of a secular lens. With regard to any notion of spirituality, some studies posit that

vegetarian and vegan foodways function to “fill the gap” left by secularism, offering meaning, identity, community, and the opportunity to enact a moral code. My contribution in this thesis is thus two-fold: firstly, to introduce a new angle in the study of food and religion by focusing on a deviant foodway in a non-Western culture and a meat-positive religion; and secondly, to offer a more nuanced perspective on a particular segment of Muslim society, and investigate how these individuals, through food choice, locate themselves within the traditional Islamic culture of their homeland and the international discourse on food and ethics, and how they conform to, resist, adapt, and enact these influences within their own religious and spiritual lives.

Definition of Terms

- *Eid al-Adha* (*Eid*): one of two holy feasts held throughout the Muslim world, commemorating Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son to God. In Cairo, Egypt, meat and animal sacrifice are an integral part of the traditional celebration. Those who can afford it purchase an animal, typically a sheep, goat, cow, or camel for slaughter, and distribute the meat among family, friends, and charities.
- *Fatwa*: a ruling or decree issued by an Islamic legal scholar; a *fatwa* is non-binding, and usually pertains to a specific topic.
- *Halal*: refers to that which is licit or permitted under Islamic dietary law, including meat from a lawful animal which has been ritually slaughtered according to prescriptions derived from the Qur’an.

- *Haram*: refers to that which is unlawful or prohibited; with regard to meat this includes swine and other unlawful species of animals, as well as lawful meat that has been improperly slaughtered.
- *Khalifa*: while also a reference to *caliph*, as in the title of the Muslim successor of the prophet Muhammad, *khalifa* here refers to the notion of “steward,” and the responsibility of stewardship bestowed by God upon humans over the natural world.
- Plant-based diet: similar to a vegetarian or vegan diet, but with focus on “whole” foods--fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, with an aim to minimize or eliminate all processed foods, including salt, sugar, and oil.
- Religious vs. Spiritual: my use of the terms “religious” and “spiritual” is reflective of the lived religion approach, in that I take the lead of the use of the terms from my interviewees, rather than academic definitions. As one scholar explains, we should not take such distinctions at face value, and “be alert to the social meanings behind such distinctions” (McGuire 5). I have found, for example, when interviewing an individual who is nominally Muslim but inwardly agnostic, s/he would not be forthcoming to a question about the relationship of religion and food, however, when rephrased with the term “spiritual,” the respondent would give a detailed answer. It is in this sense that I use each term. Broadly, “religious” refers to an adherence to an organized, institutional religion (in the context of this paper, Islam primarily) whereas “spiritual” refers to other beliefs, connections, or expressions made with the non-material world that is not necessarily linked with an established, authoritative institution. Where these terms

come up in interviews, I allow individuals to assert their own understandings of those distinctions.

- *Umma*: the community of Muslims throughout the world, as bounded by the common faith of Islam, regardless of sectarian or national divisions.
- Vegan/veganism: broadly, the avoidance of all animal products in the diet, including meat, dairy, and eggs, as well as those products derived from animal substances (such as gelatin,) and honey. The lifestyle of many vegans extends beyond food to exclude any product or service which uses or exploits animals in its industry.
- Vegetarian/vegetarianism: broadly, the practice of abstaining from meat. However, there exists wide variation in an exact definition and types of vegetarianism, including: ovo-lacto vegetarian (eats dairy and eggs;) lacto-vegetarian (eats dairy but not eggs;) ovo-vegetarian (eats eggs but not dairy;) pescatarian (eats fish but not other meat;) flexitarian/semi-vegetarian (occasionally eats meat.) Some scholars have proposed classifying types of vegetarianism on a continuum to progressively measure the degree to which animal products are avoided (Ruby 142; Twigg 18). For the purposes of this study, the type or scope of vegetarianism an individual practices is less important than the significance of any intentional abstention from meat and/or animal products in his or her belief system, social life, and larger culture.

Overview

Following this introduction, chapter 2 presents the framework in which the literature, research, and data have been situated: the field of lived religion, informed by the notion of vegetarianism as a quasi-religious practice. The lived religion theorization proved valuable for this study because integral to its approach is what people do with their beliefs, beyond official religious affiliation or prescribed practices. I investigate chosen foodways with a view to uncovering concepts of identity, meaning, and worldview at the micro-level as pertains to and is expressed by a vegetarian foodway. Of equal importance is the Islamicate context of Egyptian culture, as well as the Islamic identity of the individuals, which serve to shape and influence how individuals both perceive their practice as well as structure their narratives and arguments in social interactions. The lived religion approach functions as a tool which merges the micro-level of personal belief and practice with the macro-level of cultural context and “official” religion.

Chapter 3 grounds the research in the literature, firstly presenting an overview of quantitative sociological findings on vegetarianism primarily from a Western, secular perspective. Secondly, I outline the significance of meat in Islamic culture, examining the Qur’anic foundational bases for meat-eating, and the role of meat consumption in establishing and constructing Islamic identity. Thirdly, I present contemporary discourse on Islamic food ethics, citing scholars who, critical of the exclusivist, legalistic trend in Islamic ethics, advocate for a more comprehensive and inclusive rendering of ethical principles, encompassing both universal and secular ethical systems, as well as larger issues related to food production, including social justice, environmental concerns, and animal welfare.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach, providing the cultural, culinary, and social context which places meat at the center of the Egyptian table. I provide an overview of participants, data collection, and analysis, and delineate my position and limitations as a researcher.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the findings and discussion. Chapter 5 focuses on vegetarianism and Islamic identity, delving into the relational context of Islam as manifested in the social interactions of participants. Analyzing both the reactions of others in their social circles, and the responses given by the participants themselves, I demonstrate how, regardless of one's personal belief system, a vegetarian living in a Muslim culture is compelled to engage with Islam, both as an argument supportive of a vegetarian foodway, but also for an outward maintenance of Islamic identity. Whereas the focus of chapter 5 is more on the macro-level of food praxis, chapter 6 reverts to the micro-level, examining how respondents negotiate and interpret their food practices within Islam, with particular attention to conceptions of halal and halal meat, and participation in and perception of the annual ritual sacrifice of 'Eid. These two foci of halal and 'Eid merge individual religiosity with larger ethical issues tied to meat production and animal welfare. The discussion points to a re-interpretation of Islamic cultural norms, sometimes turning from, but more often adapting and reconfiguring, traditional mainstream interpretation to align with certain ethical principles in light of injustices and inequalities seen within the global food system.

The final chapter compiles the major findings of the research. Given the lack of scholarship on foodways outside of the Islamic framework among Muslim communities, this study suggests that vegetarianism and similar food movements may serve as starting

points to examine the confluence of Islamic and extra-Islamic local and global forces that influence religious practice, as well as reveal the spectrum and diversity of individual belief. Implications of the research include an attention to Islamic dietary laws and cultural food practices in initiatives for both dietary intervention and mitigation of industrial meat production. Future research could be extended on the connections drawn between “irreligion” and vegetarianism, and on the subject of meat and masculinity. Further studies departing from the perspective of food ethics can offer insights into changes in religiosity and religious interpretation on the ground. Food movements like vegetarianism can be indicative of a re-shaping of belief, of self-understanding, and of moral action in the world for individual practitioners who find themselves, through consumption, embedded in a global food system characterized by economic, sociopolitical, and ethical concerns which transcend cultural and ideological bounds.

Chapter II.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this project is grounded in the lived religion approach, sharpened with insights and the frequently coextensive critiques from scholarship on food studies and food and religion, and supplemented by the concept of vegetarianism as a quasi-religious foodway. While I will address each of these influences in turn, each contains multivalent and overlapping components that are complementary and have served to delineate the guiding principles of this study.

The lived religion model has shaped my research and methodology from three critical angles: firstly, and most foundationally, emphasis on the element of practice, what people do with their religious belief, here specifically how religion is enacted, encountered, understood, and practiced through a vegetarian foodway. Secondly, the engagement of ‘everyday’ spiritual and religious practices not as independent of, but informed by, and sometimes in tension with, religious institutions and traditional discourses, in this case study, the religion of Islam and Egypt as an Islamicate society. And thirdly, the notion of individual belief as a process and as a system in flux, taking into account the myriad factors which structure and contour religiosity, including, in this project, extra-Islamic influences from both other spiritual systems and secular Western discourse.

The conceptualization of vegetarianism as a quasi-religion acknowledges that such a foodway is not in and of itself religious, but that the relationship some

practitioners hold with this way of eating parallels a Durkheimian functionalist theory of religion, insofar as the active practice of, beliefs about, and motivations for replicate categories typically associated with traditional religion. The notion of vegetarianism as a quasi-religion allows us to zero in on those aspects that have been noted by scholars as having religious undertones, elements which are layered in broader notions of identity, meaning, and worldview. Those elements include ideas about life and death, purity and pollution, the phenomenon of conversion, and the ethical dimensions of the relationship of humans with animals and the environment. Locating this particular foodway within the larger theoretical framework of lived religion enables us to apply the tools and theoretical insights of religious studies to the process and practice of being vegetarian.

In sum, lived religion operates as an analytical tool with which to navigate the micro-level of individual experience and religious practice with the macro-sociocultural and global context of those individuals' lived realities; identifying the quasi-religious themes of a vegetarian foodway allows us to situate such a dietary practice and root our analysis within a theoretical framework of religious scholarship.

The Lived Religion Model: "What people *do*"

Lived religion emerged out of the cultural and practical turn of disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, with a shift away from analysis of institutionally established traditions, prescribed doctrines, and collectively-practiced belief systems to a focus on how religion is embedded and manifested in people's everyday, lived experience (Ammerman "Emerging" 4; Ganzevoort and Roeland 93; Larrimore 63). Lived religion has been deployed by religious studies scholars to attend to the religious lives and experiences of laypeople; key texts such as David Hall's *Lived Religion in America* and

Robert Orsi's *Madonna On 115th Street* have laid the groundwork for the use of lived religion as an epistemological and hermeneutical tool to better understand religious expression in daily life.

Lived religion, according to religious scholar Robert Orsi, is "religion-in-action" and "religion-in-relationships;" attention is paid to what people do with their religious traditions, with the experience of the individual situated "amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world" ("Irrelevant" 172).

Folklorist and religious studies scholar Leonard Primiano defines what he terms "vernacular religion" as "religion as it is lived," with scrutiny of how religion is encountered, understood, practiced, and interpreted (44). The context of belief, and how people actively practice and engage with it in their own lives, beyond or in addition to particular religious affiliation, is a process of reflection and re-interpretation of the self and one's faith (44). For Primiano, conceptualizing religion as a process, whereby the broad confluence of factors that shape an individual's religious beliefs are taken into account, recognizes the ways in which a person's religious identity is constructed, rather than attention only to participation in traditional 'official' religion. Primiano's conception of vernacular religion departs slightly from lived religion in that he considers *all* religion as vernacular, claiming that 'official' religion does not exist as a "pure unadulterated form," as all members of religious institutions engage, in some sense, with their own 'vernacular' context (45-6). While this is a distinction worth noting to highlight the continuing evolution in the larger field of studying people's everyday religious lives, Primiano's overall approach is nevertheless analogous to the essential premise of lived

religion, and the effort to “do justice to belief and lived experience” by multiple disciplines dedicated to religious inquiry (41).

Meredith McGuire’s *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, extends and supplements the work of Orsi and Primiano, arguing that a narrow focus on religious affiliation or official doctrine discounts “how multifaceted, diverse, and malleable are the beliefs, values, and practices that make up many (perhaps most) persons’ own religions” (4). She found in her own ethnographic research on Catholic religious movements in the U.S. that individual religiosity confounded traditional notions of religion in sociological scholarship. In particular she criticizes the quantitative data so often used as a mode of sociological inquiry for failing to address and incorporate the complexity of individuals’ religious experiences, privileging instead ‘official’ affiliation and identity (4). As she writes, people’s belief systems often do not come in “tidy, consistent, and theologically correct packages” (19). Affirming anthropologist’s Talal Asad’s critique of the Western academic preoccupation with belief, McGuire argues that the lived religion approach helps us to recognize the “trans-historical essence” of religion, and place it within the changing context of time and place (qtd. in McGuire 4; Ammerman “Finding” 190). For McGuire, lived religion allows us to grapple with the “complexities, apparent inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness” which characterize individual religious practice (18).

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman, a key contributor to the field of lived religion (although favoring the term “everyday religion” in her own work,) undertook assessment of nearly three decades of journal articles employing “lived religion” or some variation of the term as a theoretical framework. She concludes that the field is largely characterized

by what it excludes rather than includes: “attention to laity, not clergy or elites; to practices rather than beliefs; to practices outside religious institutions rather than inside; and to individual agency and autonomy rather than collectivities or traditions” (“Emerging” 1). She notes that a third of the articles offer no definition of the term “lived religion” itself (5). She hypothesizes that there is an assumption of a “taken-for-granted meaning,” but there is general agreement that lived religion is about ordinary individuals, and everyday life outside of official religious settings, with a turn to include elements often ignored or neglected in past academic research (5; 7). While the emphasis remains on what religion is not, all articles are consistent in that “practice”--what people do-- is a key component of the lived religion approach (9).

Lived Religion and Food Studies

This shift in attention to the individual over the institutional, to practice over preaching, so to speak, in the lived religion approach is echoed in the field of food studies, and extends to cross-discipline scholarship on religion and food. Food studies has broadly explored how humans relate to food across a multitude of areas, and from multidisciplinary perspectives, including the life sciences, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, geography, and psychology (Dallam xvii-iii). In their wide-ranging tome *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Counihan and Van Esterik argue that food studies has been able to “rise above the dualisms” that segment many disciplinary fields, and struggles with and embraces the entanglements of the individual and society, the global and local, historical past and contemporary culture (Counihan and Van Esterik 1). Much like lived religion, food studies has been defined by a broad grounding in the active, varying circumstances and experiences of individuals. Arching over both the field of food

studies and religion, Grumett and Muers, in their anthology *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology*, note a similar observation as those scholars of lived religion, namely that academic discourse on religion frequently focuses on “words, ideas, and texts, rather than practices, communities and contexts”(1). They consider the approaches of contributors to their volume as a corrective to this discourse, an interdisciplinary yet practice-focused theology located in the ‘everyday’ of food and eating. In the compendium *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, editor Marie W. Dallam writes that the goal of the volume is to move beyond understanding religion through “doctrines, leaders, and institutions” instead to the vernacular, lived practices of people, specifically through the study of religious foodways (xix).

Foodways, a subfield of food studies, in particular embodies the hermeneutics of lived religion, and is understood as the beliefs and practices related to the production and consumption of food (Dallam xviii; Harvey 32). While religious foodways are conventionally understood as those specific rules and rituals that fall under the purview of a given, traditional, religion, foodways as a concept more generally encompasses what people do with, think, and feel about food and eating (Dallam xviii). Religious studies scholar Graham Harvey asserts that the study of foodways offers a valuable readjustment for religious inquiry. Instead of the standard concentration on the “modernist tropes” of interior belief, engaging with religion through foodways shifts analysis to include the vernacular, the lived realities of people in their myriad contexts (32). Dietary customs and habits, with their accompanying proscriptions and prescriptions are, “to one degree or another, adopted, adapted, negotiated or resisted” by individuals for theological, spiritual, cultural, ethnic, ethical, economic, geographical, and health reasons (43). This includes

food and eating that is not necessarily religiously-defined. Harvey points out that everyone “is born into a cultural context with expectations about what will be eaten or not eaten,” whom we may or may not eat with, and notions of when, how, and where we will eat (40). Foodways are at their core actively practiced and socially engaged, and offer an entry point to examining the intersections of religion with culture and history as made manifest in the everyday dietary practices of individuals.

Thus, although not explicitly framed as “lived religion,” much of the above scholarship on food studies and food and religion aligns with the rubric of lived religion as a theoretical approach. As Harvey argues, the turn toward lived/vernacular religion approaches “provide a resounding invitation to make far more of foodways than using them as mere data to flavor analysis or theorizing” (34). Rather, we can approach religion not as an independent abstraction of ideas and beliefs, but as embodied actions practiced, performed, and consumed in the lived reality of human social interactions and with the larger cosmos (34). Not only does this reinforce the foundational structure upon which this thesis is built, but such scholarship offers insights to the ways in which food is a “bearer of complex meanings” (Grummett and Muers 1). As Dallam writes, the articles in her volume take up specific case studies which help to explain the “religious nature of food practices” (xx). The lived religion approach necessitates a deep-dive into the individual experience. The original qualitative research conducted for this project has been structured accordingly, and concretizes theory in the practice and experience of the individuals we encounter. Although I interview self-proclaimed Muslims, my interest lies in not in the “prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices,” but in the experience and expression of religion and spirituality by these individuals,

specifically through a vegetarian or vegan foodway (McGuire 1). It is in this sense that the lived religion approach grounds this project, and is guided by food studies of various disciplines.

Lived Religion and Institutional/Organized Religion

A second way in which the lived religion approach informs this study, more specifically through the influences of Ammerman, McGuire, and Orsi, is its attention to actual traditional religion in the context of practices that have no inherent religious connection. As will be further elaborated in the final section, the topic of this project is one that is not inherently religious; the quasi-religious assignation to vegetarianism reflects a characteristic of lived religion studies, in that “invisible elements” or practices which are not overtly religious or well beyond the bounds of institutional religion are examined for their spiritual implications, without necessarily directing attention to broader organized official religious influences. However, because my study is rooted in Muslims’ practice of vegetarianism in an Islamic society, attention to the larger grounding influence of Islam is, of course, critical.

Ammerman stresses that employing lived religion as a paradigm must not completely decenter official religious tradition. As her survey indicates, close to half of the analyses on lived religion prioritize private, individual beliefs over the more authoritative traditions of institutionalized religions (“Emerging” 8). Studies in which lived religion is framed thusly emphasize the role of personal, individual agency. The perception of everyday religion may then be one that is “‘un-churched,’ privatized and also quite pluralistic and inclusive in relation to the boundaries of the more established traditions” (Jeldtoft 1137). Scholars have remarked on the danger of this binary in

presuming a distinction between individualistic belief and official religion (Ammerman “Emerging” 9). McGuire, in the spirit of lived religion, acknowledges the flux of individual religiosity; one person’s biography of belief is not necessarily a microcosm of an institutional religion, nor is it historically fixed (13). However, and crucially, she underlines the fact that while belief is “subjectively grounded” in the individual, it is “fundamentally social,” constructed of “shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights” of one’s larger religious world (13-14). Orsi, similarly, reiterating that a key concern of lived religion is what people *do*, asserts that lived religion must direct “attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas—all as media of making and unmaking worlds” (172). Ammerman goes so far as to state that, ironically, in lived religion theory, “‘official’ religion” has become an “excluded category,” and future research must encompass the whole of a practice, and not assume religious traditions to be irrelevant (“Emerging” 9; 17). Therefore, much as lived religion acknowledges the sociocultural context of any system, Ammerman, McGuire, and Orsi stress that individual religion is both private and public, and caution against discounting the influences and roles of religious institutions in people’s lives (Ammerman “Everyday” 3).

This caveat is particularly relevant in our application of the lived religion paradigm to the present undertaking, with our focus on food and religion in an Islamicate society.¹ While on-the-ground research will engage with individual Muslims and their

¹ The term “Islamicate,” a neologism coined by Marshall Hodgson in his tome *The Venture of Islam*, refers “not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (59). The term is meant to distinguish between the past of traditional Islamic cultures and those modern-day societies that have undergone radical transformation as a result of colonial imperialism, the post-colonial era, and Westernization. Scholars also use the term to highlight the “complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam” (Babayan and

subjective, personal belief systems as relates to food and eating, the context of Egypt as an Islamicate culture, with Islam installed as the official state religion for nearly forty years, necessitates a balancing of the shifting microcosm of an individual's Islamic and, where relevant, other religious beliefs, with the macrocosm of Islam as institution, and Islam as manifested in Egyptian society. This factor has helped to shape and structure the academic research which grounds this study, in that a comprehensive examination of Islam, Islam in Egypt, and Islam and food are necessary starting points. Such a foundation has assisted in both the research and in the structuring of interview questions, as well as unpacking and exploring those beliefs and practices of interviewees that are grounded in or influenced by Islam.

Furthermore, the value of the lived religion approach in this project's context underscores the diversity of views within an Islamic culture. Scholarly focus on Islam is often dominated by Islam as an institution; albeit sometimes at the micro-level, (as in Saba Mahmood's examination of Muslim women's piety movements, or Leila Ahmed's exploration of the veil) emphasis is nevertheless on more "official" rituals, practices, and behaviors within a traditional Islamic framework. As Nadia Jeldtoft notes in her own examination of Islam with the lived religion approach, the overwhelming attention placed on Islam as "performed" by individuals and groups, often within organizational structures (such as religious movements or youth groups, as well as conversion accounts or Muslim immigrant experiences,) may serve to reify Islam "as the principal identity for Muslims and making Muslims 'all about Islam'" (Jeldtoft 1135). She argues that the lived religion

Najmabadi ix). See *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, edited by Kathryn Babayan, Afsaneh Najmabadi; and *Islamicate Societies: A Case Study of Egypt and Muslim India Modernization, Colonial Rule, and the Aftermath* by Husain Kassim, 1.

approach has been used “to describe the changing religious landscape in relation to Christianity and New Age religions” yet has been largely absent in Muslim communities (1138). Examining “how Muslims make sense of Islam in their everyday lives” allows us to look at “forms of Islam which are not dependent on institutionalized settings” (1135; 1138). The theoretical approach of lived religion reveals the extent to which the larger framework of Islam is adapted, reconfigured, supplemented, abandoned, or embraced at the micro-level of individual Muslims. Such an approach helps us to avoid the discourse of Islam--and Muslims--as a *sui generis* category.

Lived Religion and Extra-Islamic Influences

Finally, the lived religion framework allows us to hone in on a particular aspect of “practice” that may have religious undertones, but is not overtly religious (Islamic) on the surface, and consider those influences and experiences which are beyond the confines of traditional religion. In examining the religious dimensions of a foodway that is outside the bounds of Islamic pre- and proscriptions, we aim to uncover the specifically religious and spiritual meanings with which people imbue their food practices. McGuire remarks that scholars of religion often assume “that individuals practice a single religion, exclusive of other religious options,” and “take for granted ideas about how adherents *ought* to be committed and about what consonance *ought* to exist between individuals’ beliefs and practices and the proclaimed teachings of their chosen religion” (McGuire 12). As will be discussed later, my Muslim interviewees represent an admixture of faith and practice. Some are devout Muslims, some incorporate non-Islamic belief systems, and others consider themselves non-practicing, agnostic or atheist, but nevertheless must “declare” themselves as Muslim, and move within and engage with Islam at the level of

family, friends, and the wider Egyptian society. The lived religion approach encourages us to avoid the “normative” conceptualizations of religion warned against by McGuire by grappling with the complexity of beliefs held by individuals and revealed by their particular foodways.

Additionally, not only is vegetarianism a foodway practiced by a relative minority in Egypt, but, barring certain other religious traditions, it is primarily a movement gestated in Western, secular society. Much of the literature, documentaries, and internet media on vegetarianism is produced in the West, and many of these sources are cited by my interviewees as points of influence. This aspect necessitates for this researcher familiarity with the global context of vegetarianism through media. In particular, the ethical dimensions of vegetarianism exhibit certain notions of morality which, in the case of the use of animals and meat, can be at odds with traditional Islamic interpretations. Thus I am compelled to consider not only mainstream media on vegetarianism, but also the larger (secular) ethical issues tied to both vegetarianism and Islam, which may inform Muslim Egyptian “converts” of this foodway. Although, as described above, lived religion takes into account traditional religion, it is characterized more by reorienting scholarship to the non-religious spaces of people’s lives. It offers a framework for analyzing the spiritual implications of a non-religious practice like vegetarianism, particularly given the potential multiple and varied extra-religious influences on one person’s practice and belief(s). As will be elaborated upon in the next section, lived religion includes in its scope “unofficial” and “invisible” resources which individuals draw upon for religious practice and belief (McGuire 19). While vegetarianism is emblematic of this concept, lived religion allows for a religious examination of this non-

religious foodway, while taking into account both Islamic/religious and extra-religious influences as well as the spiritual implications of such a foodway.

Vegetarianism as a Quasi-Religion

As outlined above, the lived religion framework is characterized by a reorienting and rethinking of how religion is manifested in people's lives. Woven into the lived religion approach is recognition of those "invisible" elements that may be incongruent with or unrelated to any authoritative tradition, but nevertheless are functionally religious in people's everyday lives. Many contemporary cultural pursuits have been identified by scholars as having religious qualities, including film, music, and sports; food and eating, especially modern diets and foodways like vegetarianism, fall within this alternative vision of modern religiosity (Zeller "Quasi-religious" 295).²

Vegetarianism is not inherently religious, nor is it in any way a tenet of Islam. Abstaining from meat as a religious practice is typically associated with the Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, or Seventh-Day Adventist Christians. More recent scholarship has addressed vegetarianism as an alternative lifestyle and social movement within contemporary Western secular society, including numerous qualitative studies examining motivations of diet and health, ethics and morality, animal welfare, and environmental concerns. A significant discourse has emerged, however, that considers vegetarianism as a "quasi-religion."

In his 1967 book *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, Thomas Luckmann proposed the concept of "invisible religion" to indicate the

² See Laderman, Gary. *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*, The New Press, 2009.

“unofficial” religious resources that individuals draw upon for religious practice and belief, particularly in contemporary culture. These invisible elements would not be recognized as religious in terms of “sociological or theological definitions,” but function like religion in that they provide a sense of meaning, transcendence, and “formation of a self” (McGuire 19; Greil 381). Edward Bailey extended Luckmann’s work with the term “implicit religion,” an approach that “looks for the experience of the sacred within events of everyday life ordinarily dismissed as profane” (Greil 381). Other terms, such as “surrogate religion,” “para-religion” and “quasi-religion” similarly aim to express the idea of something that is not obviously religious, but reveals itself to be “on closer inspection” (Hamilton 65).

Sociologist Malcolm Hamilton uses the term “quasi-religion” to refer to those “phenomena which would qualify as religious in terms of most sociological definitions of religion,” but are not presented *as* religion; rather, they “ride the fence between the sacred and secular” (66; Greil qtd. in Hamilton 66). Hamilton claims that alternative diets like vegetarianism exhibit a form of spirituality, that beyond physical health the motivations of devotees are essentially non-material (Hamilton et al. 501). He grounds his analysis in data gathered from two surveys conducted in the U.K., showing that vegetarianism is frequently underpinned by ethical motivations, some of which may be construed as spiritual, providing answers to questions of life and death, guidance for meaning and morality, and notions of taboo, salvation, and discipline (508).

Scholar of religion Benjamin Zeller clarifies, arguing that the refusal to eat meat does not necessarily betoken a spiritual practice, but that vegetarianism, as a foodway, can “instil food and eating with transcendent qualities,” foster notions of meaning and

purpose, and generate like-minded communities (“Totem” 13). Zeller bases his findings on a series of oral histories with vegans which are reported in the above-mentioned book *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*. He finds that “practising vegans lived their foodways in a manner generally paralleling religion, and many... explicitly identified their veganism as a spirituality or individualized religion” (“Totem” 15). For Zeller, the value in approaching vegetarian foodways as a quasi-religion offers “analytic traction” in that we can apply the hermeneutics of religious scholarship to help understand the conversion to and practice of vegetarianism (“Quasi-Religious” 295). Calling vegetarian and vegan foodways “quasi-religious” “does justice” to those whose dietary practices are invested with “ultimate concerns and values,” and the scholarship of religion offers a methodology with which we can try to understand how and why an individual adopts a vegetarian foodway (295).

Broadly I will argue that a vegetarian foodway is akin to religion insofar as it contributes to identity, informs meaning and purpose, and crafts a particular ethical worldview. But more particularly, and to ground this project more solidly in religious scholarship, I will focus on four “themes” that have emerged in quasi-religious treatment of vegetarianism: the life/death paradox; ideas about purity and pollution; the experience of conversion; and ethical dimensions of the relationship of humans with animals and the environment. All of these categories have featured prominently in traditional religious scholarship, and have been recurrent in my interviews. Although not always explicated with the same terminology, my interviewees’ narratives strongly invoked these themes. Delineating these four categories has allowed me to structure and organize my analysis of

each person's story, motivations, and struggles, and to embed their discourse in broader (and lived) religious scholarship.

Conclusion

As Zeller sums up, “without the theoretical insights provided by” religious scholarship, “it is difficult to study how and why people become vegetarians...but with the help of such approaches, scholars can begin to understand the processes” (“Quasi-Religious” 309). Thus in regarding vegetarianism as a quasi-religion we can better deconstruct the ways in which it is a spiritually meaningful practice. And considering vegetarianism through the lens of lived religion allows for a new perspective on religious and Islamic practice and belief in a Muslim society.

In short, the lived religion theory provides a means with which to engage this study from three critical angles: one, how religion and religious/spiritual beliefs are practiced, enacted, and negotiated through food and eating; two, the context of Islam as an “official” religion and the Muslims who practice it in both their subjective belief systems and as participants of an Islamic society; and three, the amalgamation of belief and practice that results from a multi-faceted global discourse on vegetarianism. Regarding vegetarianism as a quasi-religion allows us to articulate the religious/spiritual dimensions of this foodway in and of itself.

Vegetarianism in all of its configurations is unique in that inherent within are issues beyond mere dietary concerns. As Harvey articulates, “the intimate violence required in order to eat other living beings is at the heart of the relational engagement with the world that is life” (32). This interconnection is laden with moral and ethical implications which can carry religious dimensions. As a foodway, vegetarianism is

centered “firmly in the context of human interactions” but also, with the rejection of meat and sometimes animal products, is rooted in “the larger-than-human world” (35).

Vegetarianism, ostensibly a non-religious practice, has spiritual underpinnings that both reflect and refract the religious belief systems of individuals living in an Islamicate culture and global society.

Chapter III.

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork from which to explore vegetarian foodways in the context of Islam and as a quasi-religious practice. In the course of my research, I have come across a limited number of academic sources addressing Islam and vegetarianism; aside from a handful of texts that explore the issue directly, other references were to be found within larger discussions concerning Islam and the environment, or Islam and animals, with vegetarianism mentioned often only secondarily. While this was initially frustrating, it was at the same time encouraging as to the novelty of the project. This, combined with the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, necessitated drawing from varied bodies of literature to establish an integrative foundation from which to explore vegetarianism as a non-Islamic practice and within an Islamic culture.

This literature review encompasses three areas. The first section offers a broad overview of scholarship on vegetarianism. This includes quantitative studies that examine the health and ethical motivations of vegetarians, primarily in the West, and from a Western, secular perspective. These studies are important because the non-religious practice of vegetarianism is a particularly Western phenomenon, and those in other parts of the world who choose to be vegetarian are often influenced by popular Western discourse on vegetarianism. In addition to the ways in which a vegetarian foodway contributes to the formation of self, identity, and community, the motivations cited in quantitative studies point to particular spiritual or religious themes that designate vegetarianism as a quasi-religious practice. The four themes to be examined are the

following: purity and pollution; the experience of conversion; the life/death paradox; and humans, animals, and environmental ethics.

The second section outlines the significance of meat in Islamic culture, its role in forging Islamic identity, and its consumption as a demonstration of faith. This discussion is centered on the Qur'anic foundation for eating meat, and the role of humans in the cosmos and their relationship to animals and the natural world as laid out in the Qur'an. The purpose of this section is to establish the religious foundation for meat-eating in an Islamic culture like Egypt, to introduce Islamic arguments *against* vegetarianism, and therefore to underscore the significance of a Muslim's refrain from eating meat.

The third section presents a review of contemporary Islamic food ethics. The scholars here criticize the exclusivist and legalistic trend of Islamic food ethics, and advocate for an approach that includes Islam as well as more universal, transcultural values. Because modern food production, and the meat industry in particular, has implications which entwine socioeconomic factors, politics, issues of labor injustice, and environmental sustainability, a discourse which transcends national and ethno-religious boundaries is crucial. Vegetarianism here emerges as a site of reinterpretation of Islamic values in the context of globalization, and as a means with which to "bridge" secular and Islamic ethical systems.

Vegetarianism in the Literature

The study of vegetarianism has been approached from a myriad of perspectives, including anthropological (Fiddes 1991), religious (Hamilton 2000; Dyczewska 2008; Nath 2010), feminist (Adams 2000; Ali 2015), and as a social movement (Sylvestre 2009; Cherry 2006). Other scholarship is largely informed by qualitative research consisting of

both wide-ranging surveys and in-depth interviews, primarily centered in the Global North. These studies have identified an extensive variety of motivations and examined the adoption of and conversion to a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. Many of the dominant themes that are revealed from these common motivations serve as entry points to a spiritual examination of consumption.

Health vs. Ethical Motivations

A distinction is made in academic studies, as well as among practitioners themselves, between “health” and “ethical” vegetarianism. Those who adjust their diet for health reasons typically restrict meat and animal products solely or primarily for issues of physical well-being and weight loss. Ethical vegetarians, on the other hand, transition for reasons of animal rights, social justice, and environmental concerns. Where health vegetarianism tends to be gradual, ethical vegetarianism is often an abrupt “conversion experience” precipitated by a link made between moral convictions and the realities of meat production (Ruby 142-43). Numerous quantitative studies have been conducted analyzing and measuring the motivations of the adoption of a vegetarian diet (Fox and Ward 2008; 2007; Hoffman et al. 2013; Rosenfeld and Burrow 2017; Lindeman and Väänänen 2000; Lindeman and Sirelius 2001). One conclusion has been that the two groupings differ in their ideological bases; where the diets of health vegetarians are inclined to the experiential and the (physically) internal, centered on concerns of fitness, energy, and the avoidance of disease, ethical vegetarians “often cast their motivations within a philosophical, ideological or spiritual framework,” and are outwardly focused on animals and the environment (Fox and Ward “Health, Ethics” 425). Rosenfeld and Burrow raise concerns about this distinction, rightly stating that there may be “other”

reasons for a vegetarian diet that do not fall into the either/or category of health or ethics (including finances, politics, family, or taste preferences) (459). Also, there are occasions where these categories may overlap, e.g. a health-motivated vegetarian may also be externally-oriented in an attempt to be an example of social change (459). Conversely, in some sociological investigations, concerns about animals, the environment, and religious beliefs are often conflated “within one larger construct of ethical motivation,” or not considered underneath the ethical rubric at all (459).

For the purposes of this study, I do not make a distinction between “health” or “ethical” vegetarians or vegans. Firstly, as pointed out above, many beliefs or motivations straddle both categories, or do not fit into one or the other. Because my approach is grounded in lived religion, my objective is to focus on an individual’s perception and expression of his/her own experience of food and religion; both ethical and health (and other) issues will be raised in the context of this endeavor. Thus even with those individuals who adhere to the practice for health reasons, I delve into their thoughts and opinions about ethical issues intrinsically connected to vegetarianism, in the context of religion.

Secondly, many studies have shown that even health vegetarians tend to add other reasons to their diets over time (Hamilton 67). Throughout one’s dietary “journey” in vegetarianism, there is evidence for a “convergence of beliefs” in both health and ethical concerns, regardless of one’s starting motivations (Fox and Ward “You are what you eat?” 2586). In particular, environmental justifications often emerge as motivators, both as later rationalizations of adhering to the diet, and as a consequence of exposure to other views within a given vegetarian community (2586). Fox and Ward posit that “a

vegetarian diet can become an end in itself, or one of a set of bodily practices that reflect a range of relations, not only with the materialities of physiology or biochemistry, but also with ideological and philosophical commitments that may extend beyond health” (2591). A vegetarian or vegan lifestyle can represent a confluence of relations then, from physical notions of purity and holism, to one’s broader interconnections and views about the environment, animals, and issues of industrialization and globalization tied to modern-day food production (2592).

Consequently, I regard ethical motivations as a critical dimension of an analysis of the spiritual and religious dimensions of a vegetarian foodway. As will be expanded upon below, many of the ethical issues are congruent with themes typically studied under the discipline of religion. Moral conviction about the rights and status of animals, the relation of humans to the natural world, life, death, and sacrifice are all issues that fall under the purview of religion. This is not to say that health motivations are inconsequential; analyses suggest, emphatically even, that food choice is a “domain within which one expresses one's ideals and identity” and that includes the myriad of dietary motivations, including health behavior (Lindeman and Sirelius 175). Beyond external, and perhaps more ethical, relations, vegetarian food habits engage with one’s emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural identity (Fox and Ward “You are what you eat?” 2592). A vegetarian foodway “signifies much more than just what one is allowed to eat and what one is not; it is rather a question of an ideology of how life ought to be lived” (Lindeman and Sirelius 175). In fact, it is in this sense that such qualitative studies bolster the theorization of vegetarianism as a quasi-religion. Zeller insists that the spiritual implications of a vegetarian diet are important because what an individual

chooses to eat and not eat “acts as a powerful social and psychological signifier of identity, community, and worldview” (“Totem” 17). As many of these studies show, the broad span of motivations for a vegetarian foodway can become central to one’s identity; the deliberate maneuvering that is involved to engage with a vegetarian diet engenders a sense of purpose and becomes a feature of one’s perception of self (Rosenfeld and Burrow 456-8). Fox and Ward conclude that vegetarianism is “both practice and identity” (2594). This is very much in keeping with the lived religion approach, where the “practice” of vegetarianism is intimately tied with the relational context of the individual to his/her culture, religion, self, and society, as well as the local and global forces in food production (2593).

Spiritual/Religious Themes of Vegetarian Foodways

Purity and Pollution; Totem and Taboo

One particular aspect of vegetarianism, a concept which is more generally approached from the standpoint of religion, is the notion of taboo, an avoidance of those things or behaviors which are corrupting or forbidden. Many discussions on religion and food center on the proscriptions and prescriptions of particular foodstuffs within religious traditions. Behavior in which certain foods are avoided (as pork for Jews and Muslims, or beef for Hindus) is regarded as religious in nature (Hamilton 68). Such practices, particularly the eating of halal (permissible) meat in the context of Islam as will be further discussed below, have functioned to establish both community and identity. Zeller argues that vegetarianism “functions analogously” to religious practices of taboo foods in that polluting foods are excluded, allowing for control over both the body and social situations (“Quasi-religious” 296). Anthropologist Mary Douglas’ seminal work on the

purifying or pollutive nature of certain foods, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), emphasizes the importance of social and historical context in analyzing the sacred and profane in religious dietary laws, ““where rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience”” (qtd. in Zeller 296). Julia Twigg, a British sociologist writing in “Food for Thought: Purity and Vegetarianism,” extends Douglas’ thesis and argues that the defiling nature of blood and meat, that which is extracted from the diet, contrasted with the “theme of the natural,” that which offers purification, underlie the structure of vegetarianism (17). Twigg establishes a gradation of food, placing “taboo” foods --such as raw meat or carnivorous animals, which lie above the “dominant culture boundary”-- at the top, followed by more “bloody” red meat, then “non-blood” chicken and fish (18). The “vegetarian boundary” begins with animal products of eggs and dairy, and is followed by the “vegan boundary” of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. The proximity of meat to the boundary of “taboo” categorizes meat as a polluting substance. This is contrasted with the wholeness and vitality of vegetarian foods; they are alive, where meat is dead (25). For vegetarians, it is not just raw meat that is taboo, but all meat, which is “too dangerous and polluting a substance to ingest even when cooked” (Hamilton 69). Twigg names vegetarianism as a “purity movement,” where food is “vibrant, full of...the life force of nature” (24-25). The implication is that a purifying essence is taken in and embodied through the eating of vegetarian foods.

Zeller proposes a neo-Freudian interpretation of the concept of taboo, and, its antithesis, totem. Where, in Freud’s understanding, totem is the thing that binds a group together, and is typically so sacred it is *not* eaten, Zeller considers totem foods as those that *are* eaten (“Totem” 17). For vegetarians and vegans, vegetables and other plant-

based foods can serve as symbols of community and identity in that they link the individual to a “broader cultural movement” which avoids and consumes the same foods (17). Taboos operate to define the self against the other (19). Meat, and sometimes other animal products, are rejected and marked somehow as “uniquely wrong” (18). For Zeller, taboo foods lead “practitioners to invest this avoidance with meaning and relevance, and form a community of practice around it” (18). Although he grants that not everyone would consider themselves engaged in a form of quasi-religious eating, what one consumes contributes to the crafting of the self, one’s spiritual outlook, and place within a larger community (17).

Zeller’s work is particularly focused on contemporary American society, and considers that certain foodways offer a means with which to construct a moral and ethical self, as well as a community of practice, in an increasingly individualized and secularized culture, where the influence of traditional religion is on the wane (“Totem” 18). Twigg’s analysis is drawn from a very specific culture of vegetarianism as was occurring in the U.K. in the 1970s, and Hamilton’s research also, mentioned above, is based in the U.K. While the contexts of each study are vastly different, and the specifics perhaps not relevant to all manifestations of vegetarian foodways, what I wish to point out at this juncture are the broader, spiritual implications of a dietary practice which considers animal foodstuffs in particular forbidden or restricted. An observation that both Zeller and Twigg make is of the immanentist nature of vegetarian practice. Twigg speaks of the “life” in vegetarian food, compared with a fear of consuming meat, something impure, a “religious link” with an “immanentist, this-worldly form of mysticism” (26). There is a “moral and spiritual certainty” obtained by vegans and vegetarians in what they choose to

eat or not (Zeller “Totem” 16). The “this-worldly” practice of totem and taboo foods defines relationships “between objects and ideas within particular cultural, social, spatial, and temporal contexts” (Rouse and Hoskins 228). Vegetarianism, not only in defining the self, offers a way of being that also considers the role of the individual in the world, and the relationship with non-humans, and invests “the quotidian act of eating with absolute significance” (Zeller “Totem” 18). Rather than food choices based purely on health and nutrition, foods as totem and taboo become “emblems of identity,” and connect practitioners to other like-minded individuals, creating a sub-culture not unlike the bonds formed by religious identity (18).

Conversion

In her analysis of “Vegan Conversion Narratives as Social Praxis,” Patricia Malesh conceives of vegetarian and vegan narratives as “stories of becoming,” in which past and present versions of the self are juxtaposed to both construct and destroy personal and social identity (135; 143). The meat-eating, past self, bound through its consumption to the dominant culture and social norms, is contrasted, or at a crossroads with, the present and future self of “one who embodies an alternative to this norm” (135). The conversion narratives articulate this intersection, and are “most often associated with religious or spiritual awakenings” (133-4). The moments or process of transformation are pinpointed, and help to explain beliefs that are not sanctioned by societal norms and “justify them as socially significant” (134). Malesh’s article zeroes in on the facets of personal and social identities that are shaped and impacted by transition to vegetarian foodway.

The process of conversion represents a second aspect of vegetarianism that falls under the purview of religion, and one that, similarly to taboo foods, plays a key role in constructing identity and community. Many studies of vegetarianism liken the change to a vegetarian or vegan diet to a “religious conversion” (McDonald 2000; Fox and Ward “Health Ethics” 2008; Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Ruby 2012). Zeller views this particular component of a vegetarian foodway as one of the primary themes that showcases the utility of religious studies (“Quasi-religious” 302). Zeller parallels the conversion stories of vegans in his own study to that of the Apostle Paul, “wherein they felt an immediate impetus to convert after a radical experience of disjuncture, ranging from reading about the meat industry to visiting a commercial slaughter operation” (“Taboo” 15). Beardsworth and Keil similarly found conversion cases which were “triggered” by an intense experience, often recalled with distress or disgust, and resulting in an abrupt change in dietary eating patterns (267). Other, more gradual cases were a process of adaptation over time, often extending back to childhood (266). Zeller found such processes “akin to what one finds today in the New Age movement, involving intensive searching, exploration, and a more active experience of choosing veganism” (Zeller “Taboo” 15).

Zeller distinguishes these conversions as “passive and “active” models, a theoretical paradigm often employed in sociological analysis of religious recruitment and conversion. The passive subject’s conversion is frequently instigated by external powers, with the active convert engaged in more of a meaning-seeking process. The passive model begins with a feeling of anxiety, discomfort, and anomie, punctuated by a moment of crisis (Zeller “Quasi-Religious” 303). “The process occurs because these individuals

perceive some degree of tension or cognitive dissonance between their current eating habits and what they think is the correct, better, or true way to eat” (306). The active model emphasizes the idea of “seekerhood” in which an individual engages with intentional experimentation, reading, and exploration to uncover the right foodway for them (308). Active converts likewise experience an anxiety or cognitive dissonance, and claim agency in resolving this disparity (308).

As will be discussed in the evaluation of my own interviews, most subjects fall somewhere between the two, in that there were significant, emotional experiences which happened *to* them, as well as a rational process of investigation and learning about vegetarianism or veganism, animal rights, and so forth. As a “deviant” foodway, vegetarianism is based in what may be presumed to be “countercultural beliefs.” This predicated a justification of one’s transition, and reinforces the importance of conversion as narrative and as paradigm as a tool with which to uncover the deeper, spiritual implications which resonate within the self, the self and society, and spiritual/religious practice.

Life/Death Paradox

The anxiety experienced above overlaps with a further parallel between vegetarianism and religious experience: the anxiety produced by the life/death paradox (Zeller “Quasi-Religious” 297). Beardsworth and Keil call attention to a significant unifying theme in all of their transcripts of vegetarian interviews: a “deep seated ambivalence which is located within the very act of eating” (“Vegetarian Option” 284). The oppositional tension between food that gives life and the life that must be taken produces an “an anxiety rooted in...existential ambiguities which in the mundane

proceedings of everyday life can normally be avoided or left unexamined” (285).

Beardsworth and Keil attribute such anxiety to a profound guilt over the death of animals for one’s nourishment, which forms a moral foundation for renouncing meat and animal products (285).

Many religions, particularly the Abrahamic traditions, assuaged the guilt related to slaughter through an anthropocentric ideology, whereby animals were conceived of as divinely-sanctioned beings for the use of human consumption (286). Beardsworth and Keil argue that “in modern societies secularization has largely eroded the religious shielding surrounding slaughter” (286). Hamilton regards vegetarian foodways as a counter-current to modernity, where animals are no longer situated in a nature vs. culture dynamic, but considered, if not equal to humans, no longer inferior objects (70). He considers this newer “non-anthropocentric ethos” as a product of separation from animal husbandry and slaughter in industrialized societies, and as a reaction to the brutality of factory farming (70). Proponents of vegetarian foodways often oppose the view and treatment of animals as food objects, and espouse a reverence for all life and a rejection of violence (70). The confidence or peace of mind which may have been held, broadly, in the pre-industrial era regarding the use of animals for meat, and upheld by traditional belief systems is, in the context of massive urbanization, achieved through the avoidance of meat (Beardsworth and Keil 287).

As Zeller points out, one of religion’s roles was to offer “solutions to basic human anxieties, often in the form of divine reassurance” (“Quasi-Religious” 299). Lacking the “protective mechanisms” traditionally put in place by religion, slaughter and meat production become for vegetarians as much about what it means to be human “as it is by

concern with the welfare of animals”(Beardsworth and Keil 286; Hamilton 70). As will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, this anxiety persists among some Muslims and is manifested in the tension between the technical application of halal slaughter and the reality of the conditions of factory farming and environmental effects, raising debates about the “essence” of Islamic dietary laws.

Humans, Animals, and Environmental Ethics

A final, broad category of inquiry into a quasi-religious aspect of vegetarianism is the relationship of humanity to the natural world, and the perceived purpose of animals in relation to humans. Whereas most of the studies thus far cited look particularly at vegetarian foodways from a Western, secular perspective, one cannot ignore the role of traditional religion in defining and establishing the relationship of humans and animals. While this will be discussed in detail in our examination of Islam, the Abrahamic religious traditions overwhelmingly adhere to an anthropocentric structure, an institutional ideology under which falls a range of considerations, including traditional religious notions of the status of humans in the cosmos and with animals; contemporary notions of this relationship in light of industrialization and globalization; and, concurrently, environmental concerns as relates to the mechanized production of food, including both environmental and social justice.

The ethical strain of vegetarianism frequently includes some notion of animal rights. Concern over the treatment of animals in meat production has shown to be one of the primary drivers in conversions to vegetarianism (Hamilton 67; Grumett and Muers 5). Scholars have noted the turn among vegetarians towards a non-anthropocentric view of the world; many of the key texts of the vegetarian movement in the latter half of the

twentieth century, such as Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1976) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), articulated the value of animals in and of themselves (apart from their use to humans) and argued against an instrumentalist approach to animals. As mentioned above, the decline of an anthropocentric ethos has been attributed to industrialization, and vegetarianism can be viewed as a stand against factory farming and mechanized meat production, as well as an assertion of a relation with animals based on "peaceable co-existence" rather than one founded on subordination and exploitation (Grumett and Muers 6). Such a position is a direct challenge to an Abrahamic hierarchical paradigm, and exemplifies the changing ethics with regards to the modern realities of nonhuman animals, and demands a negotiation with traditional belief systems.

Finally, there has been a growing awareness of the effect of animal agriculture on the environment, and the resultant ethical motivations for a vegetarian foodway demonstrate a range of issues. Some commitments are based on the health concerns of both humans and animals, as well as nature itself, as pertains to factory farming and the detrimental reverberations of antibiotics, pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and GMO foodstuffs in the cycle of meat production and animal products. Other environmental motivations focus on the broader, more global concern of climate change and animal agriculture as a significant contributor to global warming. Willis Jenkins, who writes on the connection of food movements with climate change and the place of religion and religious ethics therein, argues that "food offers a site to develop a postnatural ecological politics in which humans have responsibility and nonhumans have agency" (74). He argues that the power of humans over nature in this period of the Anthropocene--a term denoting the current epoch in which the ecosystem of the planet is impacted by human

activity--poses an ethical conundrum which compels contemplation of “not *if* humans should be involved but what are the criteria for good involvements”(73). Referencing the “quotidian turn” of religious studies as exemplified by the “everyday” approach of lived religion, the scope of climate change is relatively abstract, and at a scale that no person directly experiences (77). Certain foodways allow individuals to recreate the commensality traditionally regulated by religions, with the earth operating as a kind of table, allowing “participants to collaboratively reshape biocultural practices of self formation” (77). A vegetarian foodway considers the “biocultural collaborations through which we make food,” and determines whether “we become violent or caring, exploitative or just in our relations with one another” (73). This relation not only contributes to self-understanding and delineates our role in the natural world, but also includes a comprehensive notion of justice that encompasses other modes of exploitation and oppression--human as well as nonhuman--in food production.

Islam, Meat, and Vegetarianism

Scholar of religion Richard Foltz observes that although Islamic societies can be found across the globe and encompass diverse cultures, communities and nations, the “one social factor that they all seem to share is the eating of meat” (“Vegetarianism”). Not only is meat-eating licit in Islam (with the exception of carrion, blood, and pork,) it is considered a gastronomic component of the Qur’anic commandment to “live a good life,” and is an expression of faith (Freidenreich 134, Moosa 135). As Foltz notes, religious tradition does not necessarily “determine an individual’s attitude toward” animals and meat-eating, but it must also be acknowledged that refraining from and even renouncing practices which are encouraged by and/or commanded in holy texts

represents a challenge to religious doctrine on the part of the individual (“Animals” 3). With the exception of intoxicants, all Islamic dietary laws center around meat (Benkheira 227). Meat has functioned as a marker of Islamic communal identity since the inception of Islam up to the present day. This section’s focus is on the fundamental role of meat, and the permitted use of animals for humans, as laid out in the Qur’an and classical sources of Islam. As the primary universal source of Islam for all Muslims, the Qur’an outlines the foundational precepts regarding meat and meat-eating. While these mandates may inspire varying interpretations, both historically and in the context of the modern world, they form the core from which debates both for and against meat-eating arise.

Meat and the Construction of Islamic Identity

Religious scholarship has long recognized the importance of food in defining religious communities. Food in a religious context figures prominently in ritual ceremonies, traditional celebrations, and daily consumption, from feasting to fasting, sacrifice of animals to abstention from particular foodstuffs, symbolic communion and commemorative meals. Food binds religious communities together, and demarcates them from others. Food practices express and transmit culture, shape communal and individual identity, and play a central role in boundary construction (Moosa 135; Ali 268; Freidenreich 4). Islamic food rules served as a grounding mechanism for identity in the establishment of the first Islamic community, and likewise in contemporary times, function as a potent signifier of Islamic affiliation and marker of faith in an increasingly globalized world.

In his book *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*, David Freidenreich examines this boundary-marking and

identity construction among the Abrahamic religions, and the ways in which dietary laws established boundaries between “us” and “them” in early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Qur’anic discourse on food distinguishes Muslims from Jews and Christians on the one hand, and the idolaters of pagan religions on the other (131). Four verses in the Qur’an lay out the dietary prohibitions to be adhered to by believers: 2:173, 5:3, 6:145, and 16:115 (133). While some verses elaborate in more detail, each affirms four basic restrictions: dead animals (those that have died without human interference,) blood, pork, and any animal dedicated to a being other than Allah. God may be benevolent if one unintentionally errs in these food prohibitions, but sacrilegious offense must be avoided, in particular any that would mark “the consumer as an idolater.” “Eat not of (meats) on which Allah's name hath not been pronounced: That would be impiety” (6:121; Freidenriech 133). In fact, numerous verses reiterate that the name of God must be recited over the animal at the time of slaughter, and that believers must not eat meat over which Allah’s name has not been mentioned (22:28; 22:34; 22:36; 6:119) (Nakyinsige et al. 353). The emphasis here is not on the illicit nature of the food itself, but its association with a God other than Allah. What a Muslim ate was early on established as an important indicator of faith, as well as a means to define the “otherness” of outside communities (Freidenreich 144).

The delineation of faiths is further underscored in the Qur’an in that while the meat of Jews and Christians is theologically equivalent, Qur’anic dietary laws are frequently juxtaposed with those of non-Muslims, marking Muslim “believers as distinct” from other Scripturists (132). While some prohibitions are retained from Judaism, Qur’anic dietary restrictions establish a “divinely ordained golden mean” between the lax

and false norms of idolaters and excessive restrictions of the Jewish faith (135). B.A. Masri, a key contributor to scholarship on meat and animals in Islam, posits that the purpose of repetition of such verses was “to liberate Muslims from the then prevalent pre-Islamic interdicts on food” (Masri 137). For Freidenreich, Qur’anic food rules “affirm the monotheism of the believers” in contrast to idolaters, “while consumption of foods prohibited under Jewish law distinguishes believers in the Prophet’s revelation from their Jewish counterparts” (Freidenreich 135).

Freidenreich’s analysis highlights the explicit, divinely-decreed teachings that underpin the imperative for a Muslim to consume licit (halal) meat, both as a dietary norm and as a marker of Muslim identity. “Halal” means “lawful” or “permitted,” and in this case refers to meat from a lawful animal which has been ritually slaughtered according to prescriptions derived from the Qur’an. Although his argument proceeds from Islam’s early historical past, the Qur’anic foundations reverberate well into the present-day, and Freidenreich’s discussion offers insights into the consumption of meat among contemporary Muslims.

Particularly with globalization and the establishment of Muslim communities in non-Muslim cultures, the issue of lawful meat consumption, and what constitutes halal meat, has become a complex issue. There exist complicated debates about whether or not the food of the “People of the Book” is halal. Among various halal associations in North America, for example, each offers vastly different criteria over the lawfulness of meat proffered by Christian and Jewish establishments, in largely Christian and/or secular societies (Mukherjee 52-54). The lawful or unlawful quality of meat in Western countries is a theological question as well as an “emotive ethnological issue” (Masri 133). While

the historical backdrop of Freidenreich's analysis centers on the delineation of faiths, present-day debates and enactments of meat consumption places the discourse of halal in a similar context of boundary-marking, where distinctions are made among Muslim minority communities and larger, majority non-Muslim countries, as well as the *umma* of a global Islam, Western secular culture, and the influences of globalization.

The consumption of halal foods has become an important "signifier of Muslim identity," and the halal industry has taken on rapid expansion in response to burgeoning Muslim communities in Europe and North America (Ali 271). While there are varying degrees of adherence to dietary laws among the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, including differences based on generation and location among immigrant communities, the global halal market is expected to reach over \$700USD billion by 2025 (Bonne and Verbeke 2; "Halal Food"). In his article "Global Halal: Meat, Money, and Religion," S. Romi Mukherjee argues that halal is not "simply about meat" but "emerges as an ethos, a site of political and spiritual contestation... a traditional, yet radically, post-modern quest for authenticity" (23). Halal becomes a "grounding mechanism" and a "strategy," whereby one can participate in the supra-national community of Muslims through food choices, while living in a globalized, larger non-Islamic culture (24). Mukherjee characterizes halal as "a mobile and mutating political, social, and corporal border" which must be understood in terms of the "larger will to distinction that has typified the history of Islam and its always-already global *umma*" (68). As scholar of Islam Kecia Ali explains, "good Muslims not only do not eat non-halal meat, good Muslims eat halal meat," and meat consumption becomes definitive of a correct Islamic foodway, in addition to reinforcing a kind of identity politics (270-71). Halal becomes a means to navigate the "shifting

dialectic of inside/outside,” a praxis that is at once “personal and communal” (Mukherjee 24). Much as Freidenreich’s book suggests the power of commensality to create a new faith community, adherence to halal codes among modern-day Muslims signifies a “belonging to a particular moral or political community and its values and collective memory” (Mukherjee 47).

The bulk of research delving into the halal industry, consumption, and identity centers on Muslim minority communities in the West, particularly North America and Europe. What does this mean for this study’s context of a Muslim-majority nation like Egypt? I would argue that the maintenance of an Islamic identity has been shown to be equally as important in Muslim countries; although this phenomenon is indicated in areas of research which diverge from food and eating, important parallels can be drawn from studies into cultural practices and behaviors which assert particular forms of Islamic identity in contrast to--or in reaction to--other forces. In particular, one can point to grassroots Islamic piety movements in Egypt, where it has been observed that “religious rhetoric tends to locate the sources of problems in society in secularization and westernization,” and “Western cultural hegemony...is held up as the root of social problems” (Lewis 93). “Greater commitment to Islam” in this context is viewed as the solution to positive individual and social change” in rejection of the influx of Western ideals, commodities, and culture (93). A similar parallel can be drawn with Leila Ahmed’s work on Muslim women and the resurgence of the veil (*hijab*). Ahmed notes that in Cairo, the donning of the *hijab* indicated “resistance to mainstream society’s perceived materialism and moral corruption” (Ahmed 210). As Mukherjee observes, “in the same manner that the veil (*hijab*) proved to be much more than a simple piece of

clothing, ‘global Halal’ cannot be reduced to a culinary idiosyncrasy of the Muslim carnivore” (5). As some of my interviews will indicate, Muslim vegetarians face challenges to their Islamic identity among their social and family circles because of their choice to eschew meat. It is therefore my position that the eating of meat, properly slaughtered, remains an important demonstration of faith and nexus of identity among Muslims in Muslim societies as well as in other global communities.

In addition to the boundary-marking qualities of Islamic food rules, a second, related argument in favor of eating meat that emerges from the Qur’an is its emphasis on what Muslims *should* eat as a demonstration of faith and gratitude. Several verses repeat that believers must eat all things deemed lawful, including meat: “Believers, do not prohibit the good things which God has permitted you, and do not transgress, for God does not love the transgressors. Eat of the permitted and good things which God has provided you” (5:87–88; Freidenreich 138). Sūrat al-An‘ām, “The Cattle,” commands Muslims to “eat of (meats) on which Allah's name hath been pronounced, if ye have faith in His signs,” and in the following verse, Muslims are chastised if they avoid meat which is divinely permitted, “lest they appear to observe unfounded food restrictions” (6:118; Freidenreich 133). Islamic food regulations are again placed in relief against the more restrictive guidelines of Judaism (Ali 274; Freidenrieck 135; Masri 137). However, while the eating of permissible food demarcates the “true knowledge” possessed by Muslims from the “falsehood of idolaters’ claims,” these verses contain an additional component, a command to eat of the “good things” which God has provided: “Eat of the good things [*tayyibāti*] that We have provided for you, and be grateful to Allah, if it is Him ye worship;” “So eat of the sustenance which Allah has provided for you, lawful and good

[*tayyiban*]; and be grateful for the favours of Allah, if it is He Whom ye serve” (2:172; 16:114; Freidenreich 134). The Arabic root word *tayyib*, meaning “good” or “wholesome” is found in conjunction with many of the Qur’an’s remarks on meat (Moosa 136).

Tayyib “connotes things that are lawful and permissible” but, more importantly, the notion of permissibility includes “the elements of pleasure and delight” (Moosa 136). The consumption of “good” and lawful foods exhibits a devotion to God, and partaking of such things with pleasure and appreciation serves as a characteristic of the faithful, for they are expressing gratitude (*shukr*) for the provisions given by God (Hoffman 465). Food for a Muslim is to be regarded as a “source of divine beneficence and mercy” (Moosa 137). Unlike nonbelievers, whose lack of gratitude is construed as *kufur*, a denial of the truth, it is incumbent upon devotees to eat not only of that which God has made lawful, but with great pleasure and celebration (Hoffman 465). References to meat and animals for human use and consumption coalesce around the theme of sustenance provided by God as a sign of His existence and goodness, and of the relationship of humans to God, via their reception of His gifts (465).

Thus moving one step beyond the notion of halal, or simply “permitted” meat, Muslims should consume what is good and wholesome, of which meat is a kind, expressing a reverence for God in appreciation of the gifts provided in Creation. The concept of *tayyib* and the injunction to consume that which God has made lawful forms one of the key Islamic arguments to emerge in favor of eating meat, and against vegetarianism. Abstention from meat is counter to “the Qur’an’s insistence that believers ought to consume all ‘permissible and good’ foodstuffs” for “behavior to the contrary

constitutes either a denial of God's authentic revelation or a rejection of the leniency God has mercifully extended to the believers" (Freidenreich 135). Thus an Islamic argument against vegetarianism may claim that "it usurps divine legislative power by forbidding what God made lawful" (Ali 273). Islamic legal scholar Mawil Izzi Dien goes so far as to pronounce that "vegetarianism is not permitted" under Islamic law, and that Muslims are even prohibited from abstaining from foods allowed by Islam (qtd. in Foltz "She-camel" 156). In his book *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*, Izzi Dien cites the classical Islamic legal scholar ibn 'Abd al-Salam who, writing in the 13th century, declared: "The unbeliever who prohibits the slaughtering of an animal [for no reason but] to achieve the interest of the animal is incorrect because in so doing he gives preference to a lower, *khasis*, animal over a higher, *nafis*, animal" (146). Izzi Dien elaborates, saying that "according to Islamic Law, there are no grounds upon which one can argue that animals should not be killed for food...Vegetarianism is not allowed under the pretext of giving priority to the interest of animals because such decisions are God's prerogative" (146).

Similar arguments proliferate among non-academic discussions on the internet. A number of Islamic forums feature Q and A sections with fatwas on the issue of being Muslim and vegetarian or vegan. A fatwa is a legal ruling or decree issued by an Islamic legal scholar. Although a fatwa is based on a recognized authoritative opinion grounded in religious scripture, it is interpretive, resulting sometimes in varied answers to the same question; a fatwa is therefore non-binding, but provides advice and guidance to querying Muslims. Overwhelmingly, in answer to questions posed by believers on the permissibility of being vegetarian, fatwas allow for abstention from meat, but it is the intention and justification for such a dietary choice that is significant. On the website

Islamhelpline, the fatwa states that one may choose not to eat meat out of taste or preference,

but if one does not eat meat because he/she believes that the eating of meat should be forbidden, or because it is cruelty to animals when their meat is consumed by humans, etc. then that would be against the guidance and teachings of Islam. To believe such a thing, and thereby abstaining from eating a halaal food ordained by Allah would definitely be considered a sin. It all depends on the intention of the person for not eating the meat or any of the halaal food (Burhan).

Similarly, a fatwa on *Islamweb* states “If a person is a vegetarian and does not eat meat while believing that it is not permissible to eat the meat, then this is an innovation in religion... But if it is a way of treatment and it is the doctors who determined it, then there is no harm” (“Being a vegetarian”). And in another forum, *IslamQA*, the fatwa allows for being vegetarian or vegan, but qualifies that “You should not think that it is better to abstain from these foods, or that doing so will be rewarded, or that a vegetarian is closer to Allaah than others” for it is not permitted to do so (Al-Munajjid).

Thus, according to some Islamic readings, to avoid meat for health reasons or for matters of taste and preference may be acceptable. However, abstaining from meat for any other reason can be considered sinful. To not want to kill animals for meat out of compassion is to presume one is more merciful than God. And to stand against slaughter for certain ethical reasons, specifically to declare something haram that God has made halal, is similarly to presume one knows better than God. All justifications teeter on apostasy in traditional interpretations and understandings. This is a significant point for, as will be shown, not only do most vegetarian and vegans, even if they initially transition for health reasons, tend to add ethical reasons later on, but all of my Muslim interviewees

cite moral and ethical grounds for their dietary choices, and offer their own responses and interpretations for the above-mentioned theological injunctions.

What I wish to underscore at this juncture is the fundamental problematic that emerges for a Muslim who chooses to transition to a meat-free lifestyle. There is a “clear scriptural permission (or command) to eat meat;” meat-eating is an integral part of Muslim identity, and to abstain from meat can be construed as a rejection of God’s gifts, and even as a presumption over divine authority over what is “lawful” (Ali 273). Beyond “acceptable” reasons of health or taste, choosing to be vegetarian or vegan falls outside of the bounds of Qur’anic tenets as traditionally understood, as well as the majority practice in Muslim cultures of shared meals and rituals centered around meat. Ethical justifications for vegetarianism in particular pose a dilemma in raising questions about Qur’anic dietary laws and how they should be practiced, as well as the fundamental relationship of animals to humans. It is to this status of humans in the cosmos and their relationship to the natural world as outlined in the Qur’an to which we now turn.

Khalifa: The Hierarchy of Creation: The Relationship of Humans, Animals, and the Natural World

The relationship of humanity to the natural world, and the perceived purpose of animals in relation to humans, is a feature of both religious traditions and many ethical arguments within vegetarianism. In their anthology *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, Waldau and Patton assert that religious traditions have often “been the primary source for answers to questions such as, ‘Which living beings really should matter to me and my community?’”(14). As “vessels of

meaning...religious traditions have had a major role in passing along basic ideas about these beings' place in, or exclusion from, our communities of concern" (15). The Abrahamic religions espouse a fundamentally human-centered *Weltanschauung*. Waldau charges that the framing of contemporary ethical issues concerning animals as "overwhelmingly anthropocentric" persists, a critical issue given that "religious traditions remain...the principal influence on the criteria by which believers [choose] to value and protect, or demean and harm, living beings" (Waldau "Seeing" 53).³ The extent to which such religions underwrite or challenge the practice of a vegetarian foodway is a key point of inquiry, for it is not only what religious traditions say about animals, but how those traditions are "represented by believers' treatment 'on the ground,' as it were, of other living beings" (Waldau and Patton 15). In Islam, the relationship of humans with animals is established and defined by the notion of *khalifa*, a concept that colors and informs debates both for meat-eating and counter to vegetarianism, as well as a feature in arguments *in favor* of vegetarianism.

Khalifa refers to the cosmological hierarchy of creation. Literally translated as "successor," *khalifa* is understood by interpreters of Muslim tradition as "vice-regent," with the dominion of humans over nature confirmed in several verses: "It is He who has made you his vice-regent on earth;" "And He has subjected to you all that is in the heavens and on earth" (6:165; 45:13; Foltz *Animals* 15). Humans occupy the apex of creation by virtue not of their physical form but of their "spiritual volition," in possession

³ Waldau qualifies this assertion and takes exception to the "widely discussed claim that...religion *alone* has been responsible for exclusivist attitudes leading to environmental destruction." Speaking specifically on speciesism, an anthropocentric notion in which nonhumans are excluded from moral protections, Waldau contends that "exclusivist concerns can be found in many other secular realms.... This is not to say that religious attitudes have not been formative for nonreligious attitudes, since they often have been. The point is simply that exclusivist thinking occurs regularly outside explicitly religious contexts" (*The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*, ch. 1.2, 8).

of rational capacity and the ability to make free choice, as well as the divine attributes of compassion, justice, and mercy (Masri 6-7; Bakhos 186). The legitimate use of animals by humans is qualified by *khalifa*, and the Qur'an recurrently illustrates how animals are meant to serve the human race:

And cattle He has created for you (men): from them ye derive warmth, and numerous benefits, and of their (meat) ye eat. And ye have a sense of pride and beauty in them as ye drive them home in the evening, and as ye lead them forth to pasture in the morning. And they carry your heavy loads to lands that ye could not (otherwise) reach except with souls distressed: for your Lord is indeed Most Kind, Most Merciful, And (He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and use for show; and He has created (other) things of which ye have no knowledge (16:5-8; Foltz *Animals* 16).

Animals are thus established as functional beings made for human purposes, with clear Qur'anic injunctions on the use of animals for meat. As stated in the previous section, to not eat meat for reasons other than health, preference, or necessity can be construed as acting against the commandment of God. Such an anthropocentric structure affirms the dominance of humans and legitimizes the "use, confinement, slaughter, and consumption" of animals (Ali 269). Izzi Dien, while advocating for environmental protection and animal rights in accordance with Islamic law, nevertheless maintains a speciesist standpoint (Foltz "She Camel" 156). In his view, vegetarianism is unlawful "under the pretext of giving priority to animals," a stipulation of status that can only be made by God (Izzi Dien 146). Masri also, while passionately engaging with issues of animal testing and factory farming "leaves the traditional Islamic notion of human exceptionalism unchallenged" (Foltz "She-Camel" 155). While a vegetarian "at heart" and "by conviction," Masri recognizes that Islam does not lay down "categorical

imperatives irrespective of” humans’ need for food and predilection for meat (Masri 56-57).

However, although animals in the Qur’an are predominantly spoken of in the context of this hierarchical relation with humans, they are not depicted simply as objects of utility. Carol Bakhos, in her analysis of the Abrahamic religions’ attitudes towards animals, notes that there are over two-hundred Qur’anic passages referencing fauna, with six chapters named after specific animals (186). Aside from their place in creation, animals are otherwise described in the Qur’an as similar to humans (Foltz *Animals* 16). It is understood in the Qur’an that nonhuman animals offer obeisance to God in their own language and movements, and as Muslims (in their submission) “they coexist with their environs in constant, natural genuflection.” “Seest thou not that it is Allah Whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds (of the air) with wings outspread? Each one knows its own (mode of) prayer and praise” (24:41; (Haque and Masri 284; Foltz 16; Masri 20). Animals are spoken of as having their own communities (*umma*) just as the global, human, *umma* of Islam: “There is not an animal in the earth, nor a flying creature on two wings, but they are communities like unto you” (6:38; Foltz 17; Haque and Masri 282). The Qur’an further tells us that God communicates with animals: “And the Lord revealed to the bee, saying: ‘make hives in the mountains and in the trees, and in [human] habitation’” (16:68; Masri 21). Masri notes that the Arabic word for revelation used here in the context of the bee is the same as that used with the Holy Prophets; although he opts to stay out of the implications, some scholars have concluded that animals are capable of receiving divine revelation (Masri 21; Foltz “She-camel”151). Lastly, animals, and all of creation, are to be considered signs of God. As scholar of

Islam and ecology M.A. Parvaiz states, “The entire universe is an embodiment of Allah’s guidance to humanity:” “And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the living creatures that He has scattered through them” (42:29; 177). While the Qur’an serves as the primary scriptural source of divine guidance, humans are entreated to observe and reflect on those signs placed by God in the universe to reach deeper understanding and insight into their own souls and paths of faith (Schimmel 33).

Given, then, that animals are at once serviceable for human needs, yet accorded significance beyond their utility to us, what exactly constitutes the righteous use of animals and the natural world? As Masri puts it, what are the “qualifying conditions” attached to the “exalted rank” humans are afforded as vice-regents on earth? (4). Most scholars of Islam agree that this privileged status entails responsibility; while nature may be subjugated to humanity, “the proper human role is that of conscientious steward and not exploiter” (Foltz “She-camel” 150). Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossain Nasr, a key voice in Islamic environmentalism, writes that “Islam stands totally against the idea that humans have all the rights and other creatures have none except what we give them... Nowhere does the Qur’an give humans the right to dominate nature without protecting it and acting as its steward” (82). Zayn Kassem, writing on animals in Islamic philosophical and scriptural traditions, notes that “the ‘there-for-your-use’ dispensation of the Qur’an has largely been understood as rationale for domination, albeit in a humane manner, in the Muslim traditions, commentarial, and legal (*hadīth*, *tafsīr*, and *fiqh*) literature” (162). Mohammed Parvaiz, scholar of Islam and ecology, writes that man is not meant to be conqueror and master of nature, but its guardian and protector (176). This “paradigm of humankind as caretaker” entrusts people with and allows them to benefit

from animals and the natural world (Bakhos 186). Humans, in the unique position of dominance over other species, have been endowed with free will and moral choice; they are to use their rational capacity to observe and interpret the signs of God in the universe, and are bequeathed a moral duty as custodians of those natural signs which have been put at their disposal (Bakhos 189; Parvaiz 177). *Khalifa* for humankind is a test, and humans must bear both responsibility and accountability (Haque and Masri 280).

Although there is broad agreement, then, that *khalifa* entails responsibility and not exploitation, exact definitions are nebulous. Masri concedes that man's relationship with animals and the natural world "is primarily influenced by man's concept of the status of animals which *man gives to them* in the hierarchy" (10; my italics). Izzi Dien permits that the verses concerning *khalifa*--that God has created for humans "all things that are on the earth"-- are "intentionally left open so that human beings would not find difficulty in consuming what has been created by God and left at their disposal"(138). While Izzi Dien acknowledges that such an "allowance might be misunderstood to justify unlimited human consumption," he contends that a "careful scrutiny of texts reveals...a global environmental interest" (138). However, he concedes that the "progress of environmental legislation in the Muslim world can be a delicate task if the spirit of Islamic law is not understood and applied properly to various ecological needs" (140).

Thus, in the context of the modern-day use of animals in factory farming and the effects of industrial meat production on the environment, an interpretive tension arises. Foltz notes that there is little discussion of what constitutes the ethical use of animals for food in classical Islamic jurisprudence, and "even today any serious discourse on the viability of an 'Islamic' vegetarianism is difficult to find" (Foltz "Vegetarianism"). The

notion of a divinely-bestowed hierarchy of creation supports the majority argument of the licit use of animals for meat, and consideration of animal rights and welfare “remains firmly outside the mainstream in Muslim societies around the world today” (Foltz “She-camel” 155). Ali notes that while Muslims may be less antagonized by arguments to reduce or avoid meat because of health or environmental reasons, reactions are “particularly virulent when meat abstention is advocated for reasons of animal welfare” (279-80). Rejection of meat constitutes, in effect, a rejection of God’s revelation as pertains to humanity’s place in His Creation, of the gifts provided by God for which believers should express gratitude *through* use and consumption, and can thus be construed as an act of infidelity (Foltz “Vegetarianism”). An approach to the study of Muslim vegetarians then must consider not only the ways in which Islamic textual tradition informs beliefs about eating meat, but current interpretations of Islamic food ethics within the broader ethical discourse about food, food justice, and the implications of intensive animal farming.

Islamic Food Ethics

Thus far we have looked closely at two variant bodies of literature. On the one hand, we have vegetarian scholarship that is largely Western/secular in focus, and that strives to find the spiritual implications and underpinnings of a non-religious foodway. On the other, we have an examination of Islamic dietary laws, and the importance of what is eaten and not eaten according to canonical pro- and prescriptions as markers of identity and demonstrations of faith. In order to bridge the two, I will look at the scholarship on Islamic food ethics, and how vegetarianism, and vegetarian Muslims, can be a site of global commensality that merges both secular and Islamic values, as well as a

nexus of reinterpretation about how Islam is practiced, including notions about the “essence” of Islam and Islamic identity in the context of a globalized world.

The foremost criticism that is evident in recent scholarship concerning Islam, meat, and food ethics is the overemphasis on scriptural dietary laws and a reliance on an Islamically-derived ethics, to the exclusion of other, more universal, ethical considerations, as well as immanent environmental issues and sociopolitical concerns. As Foltz points out, particularly with regard to animal rights, Muslims, even among the diverse regional cultures of the Islamicate world, “tend to shy away from building the case for ‘Islamic’ interpretations on any other basis than that of the Qur’an, the hadiths, and the *shari’a*” (“Animals” 146). He notes that Muslim animal rights activists tend to be more secular in their outlook, and draw only secondarily from Islam, “if at all” (146). Ali likewise observes that new ideas about animals, the environment, and food inform many contemporary Muslim thinkers’ views on vegetarianism, but that those secular discourses are seldom acknowledged as points of influence; rather foundational sources are analyzed retroactively to support ethical issues tied to meat-eating (280-1). The scholars cited below advocate for an inclusivist interpretation of Islam in the realm of consumption.

In her article “Muslims and Meat-Eating: Vegetarianism, Gender, and Identity,” Kecia Ali contends that contemporary Islamic thought exhibits a preoccupation with Islamic identity and religious authenticity to the detriment of a “productive dialogue” among those who may have basic disagreements but who desire similar outcomes, insofar as aspiring to cultivate ethically-informed individuals and flourishing, virtuous societies (269). The insistence on the superiority of Islamic ethics, and the dismissal of secular and other ethical traditions, is a hindrance to broader, inclusive, ethical reflection on

contemporary issues (279). As discussed in the previous section, Ali points to the stress on Islamic dietary laws which reinforces a kind of identity politics, whereby “conventional wisdom on the issue of meat” may be bypassed in favor of the increased consumption of halal meat (269). The environmental impact of the meat industry, along with the suffering imposed on both animals and the human labor involved in its infrastructure, betokens ethical consideration beyond an assertion of identity and religious authenticity (283). A good ethical theology, according to Ali, should draw on both scientific and Western ethical discourses, as well as Islamic, in constructing twenty-first century notions about consumption. Arguing from the standpoint of gender justice, Ali claims that the attachment to Islamic notions of a hierarchical cosmology serves not only to sustain the subordination of women, (in upholding male dominance in Islamic societies,) but legitimizes the killing of animals while ignoring the suffering and injustice inherent in industrialized meat production (280). Embracing the label of “vegetarian” instead of or in addition to the label of “Islamic” relays a message that one stands “in opposition to dominant relations of injustice” (283).

Ali’s argument raises a key issue that serves as a catalyst for a broader discussion of food ethics. Implicit in her analysis as pertains to meat-eating is how food is produced rather than merely what is consumed. Mariam al-Attar, philosopher and scholar of Islamic ethics, while focusing on the issue of genetically modified foods and Muslim ethics, notes that congruent with a growing interest in food ethics in Muslim societies is “a shift in interest from focusing on food consumption to food production” (al-Attar 54). Al-Attar finds fault with the “exclusivist and legalistic trend” in modern Islamic food ethics, and advocates a “transcultural framework of ethical principles” (55). In the event

of public discourse about a mutually-shared concern, whether it be GMOs or factory farming, focus should be on establishing a common ground of shared ethical principles, rather than potentially divisive religious textual interpretation (69). Particularly in the case of food ethics, al-Attar advocates a comprehensive view that includes sociopolitical and economic concerns. Magfirah Dahlan-Taylor, writing in “‘Good’ Food: Islamic Food Ethics Beyond Religious Dietary Laws” similarly observes that the conceptualization of food justice, where focus is often on “unequal access to good and healthy food,” is limited and “problematic because it emphasizes the consumption side” (257-8). Rather, food justice should be considered “within the larger framework of socio-economic justice” a comprehensive movement that must include the production side of the food system (258). Dahlan-Taylor argues that any construction of food ethics must take into account labor injustices and the “problems of power inequality inherent in cooperative relations” (261). She reiterates Ali’s point that an Islamic conception of food justice must move beyond an “exclusivist approach to food” with its focus on dietary laws, for food is a “fundamentally socio-political issue” (260). Both authors use food production as a jumping off point for a larger discussion of, like Ali, an inclusivist rendering of ethics, one that is informed by both Islamic and secular/non-Islamic ethics, or at the very least acknowledges parallel values. The halal industry in particular serves as a critical locus of competing ethical discourse, and is one of the foremost concerns to arise in any discussion of the ethics of meat consumption in an Islamic context.

The Competing Ethics of Halal

As discussed in the previous section, there exist debates among halal certifying bodies about what actually constitutes halal food. Al-Attar expands on this complication,

noting that “modern halal” as an institution which operates in non-Muslim countries is relatively new. As a global phenomenon, modern halal is subsumed under “the complexities among markets, industries, religious institutions, and international trade in determining what *halal* is” (al-Attar 63). She alleges that the economic orientation of halal, “particularly due to the increasing demand and the rise of the “global market,” renders it “vulnerable to the rise of commercialization and conflict of interests among Islamic institutions” (63). Tariq Ramadan similarly notes that the label of “halal” is often exploited, investing products with a “religious legitimacy” and functioning as an “ethical smokescreen,” and, much like the catchphrase of “sustainable development,” veils the inherent injustices of the current global socioeconomic system (Ramadan *Radical Reform* 254). Citing the stamp of permissibility given to GMO foods by many mainstream Islamic institutions, al-Attar points out that

there is no attempt to investigate the role of the transnational corporations that monopolize the food industry and find out whether those could actually be trusted. There is no attempt to assess the extent of their commitment to the wellbeing of people and the environment and the impact of their products on agriculture in the Muslim world and the global south (60-1).

She adds that “one would not expect decisions on what is *halal* to be based only on moral and religious considerations, as profit seems to be an important driving factor” (64). Although al-Attar’s censure is based on GMOs, it extends to the meat industry in that similar ethical questions are raised, as well as the fact that 70-90% of all GMO crops globally are fed to the world’s livestock population (Van Eenennaam).

Thus, because of the global nature of “modern halal,” halal as a concept becomes a site of Islamic ethical discourse, one that is inevitably integrated with sociopolitical,

economic, and environmental concerns which cross with non-Islamic --though not necessarily conflicting--notions of justice. Dahlan-Taylor differentiates between two responses to halal which illustrate a fundamental problematic in contemporary interpretation of the “essence” of Islamic dietary laws, and which indicate the tensions between a more doctrinal rendering of Islamic practice (adaptive) and one which encompasses Islamic and secular ethical solutions to food justice (liberal contextual).

The adaptive response refers to the adaptation that takes place in applying the method of slaughter as instructed in the Qur’an to the modern mechanized process. Multiple studies delve into the technicalities of modern methods of slaughter, outlining and debating what procedures and modifications are or are not halal for the animal at the time of death. There is considerable controversy, for example, over whether or not stunning, and what modes of stunning, are halal compliant (Miele 2016; Nakyinsige et al. 2013). Mara Miele notes in her article “Killing Animals for Food: How Science, Religion and Technologies Affect the Public Debate About Religious Slaughter,” that in the U.K. numerous halal food authorities “question the adoption of a number of technological innovations in halal slaughter (largely accepted by many other halal certifying bodies, both in Europe and in other countries), and they advocate ‘traditional’ Halal as the only authentic Halal” (51). In the EU, Dahlan-Taylor, quoting from Riaz and Chaudry’s *Halal Food Production* (the co-author Chaudry the president of a halal-certifying institution in the U.S.) notes that, according to the authors, “the pronouncement of the name of God and the presence of a Muslim during the slaughter are what makes the given process of mechanical slaughter process ‘Islamic’” (“Barbarity” 356). What amounts to “typical” halal slaughter is adaptive in focusing on the “technical modalities of the slaughter”

(namely, a quick cut with a sharp instrument while the name of Allah is invoked) “which the authors take to be the essence of the Islamic dietary laws” (356).⁴

In the adaptive response, following the letter of the law is both paramount and sufficient. At issue, however, is not merely the technicality of the slaughter, but its “authenticity.” Mukherjee opines that competitors in the halal market each advertise their standards of purity in process and product in an attempt to promulgate a salvific, purchasable, practice (23). I previously demonstrated how the halal industry operates as a grounding mechanism for Islamic identity among shifting and merging cultural and religious boundaries. Halal is a strategy of the “pietization” of body and space, “a means of being at once in globalization and outside of it, a means of participating in the great brotherhood through dietary choices, and a means of sacralizing corporal and psychic interiority in an external world seemingly devoid of the sacred” (24). The adaptive response is thus characterized by an exclusivity that “differentiates Muslims from the rest of society” in striving to maintain an existing social order and “vision of the good community” (Dahlan-Taylor “Beyond” 53; 47). Muslim communities around the world are able to transform themselves into “halal zones” amidst a “secular habitus and its culinary cartographies” (Mukherjee 48). In a global world, halal practice can “illuminate how geopolitical strategies of distinction are incarnated in bodily practice and dietary ritual, how the body and its intestines are sites of political-theological recuperation” (28). The adaptive response thus imbricates halal, and expressly the eating of halal meat, in the primacy of Muslim communal identity, religious authenticity, and boundary construction.

⁴ More specifically, halal slaughter should be comprised of the following: a lawful animal that is alive and uninjured at the time of slaughter; the slaughter must be done by a trained Muslim and begun with an invocation to God; slaughter is “achieved if the trachea, oesophagus and main arteries and veins are cut in the neck region;” and the instrument must “be sharp to ensure the most stress-free and quick cut possible and optimal bleeding” (Miele 52).

Some Islamic thinkers criticize the adaptive position, again pointing to the broader picture of animal welfare, labor justice, and the environmental impact of industrial animal agriculture. Al-Attar refers to the notion of *tayyib*, discussed in the previous section, which enlarges the conception of halal food beyond the moment of slaughter: “good food [*tayyib* food] is not only wholesome and nutritious, but it is derived from trusted and reliable sources that are not involved in unjust practices such as usury, monopoly, hurting the environment, or disturbing the ecological balance” (54). While halal food may be technically permissible, it does not, in al-Attar’s view, conform to more fundamental ethical principles. Tariq Ramadan, in his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, proposes that Muslims should be concerned with the ethical consequences of more “neutral” aspects of life like consumption, and be attentive to the way food is produced, the “social and economic implications” of food consumed, and how animals are treated (123). On the latter point, Ramadan elaborates:

Muslims would do well not to rush into formulaic arguments on this point: they often concentrate simply on the way an animal is slaughtered and not on the way it is treated during its life before the ritual slaughter. It must be said repeatedly that Islamic teachings on respect for animal life are clear. The way in which sheep and other animals are treated is unacceptable, and farms where care is taken to allow animals to grow naturally and with respect are in fact more *Islamic* than is the simple application of formal rules for sacrifice (Ramadan “Western” Notes 243-4).

Although not advocating vegetarianism, Ramadan calls for Muslim countries “to reconcile themselves with the higher objectives and meaning of their ethics rather than hiding behind insistence on norms and means” and betraying the substance through fidelity to the form (“Unethical”). He makes a number of recommendations to amend modern factory farming, and stipulates that taking an animal life is only halal if it has been respected and spared ill-treatment and suffering (“Unethical”).

B.A. Masri, similarly, does not openly promote vegetarianism, but interprets meat-eating very much in the liberal contextual perspective, and claims that Islamic countries “have started emulating their Western preceptors” in practices like factory farming, “feeling that civilized Western society has given its tacit approval to these and many other cruel methods of making money [which] are corroding the moral ethos of the underdeveloped as well as the affluent nations of the East” (45). For Masri, the technical permissibility of meat is compromised by the “unnatural and inhumane conditions” under which animals are bred, and compels, if not vegetarianism, a seeking-out of humanely-produced animal products:

Most of these un-Islamic businesses are flourishing in Islamic countries due to the ignorance of the consumer public. People do not know how meat chickens are being reared...Fowls and other food animals are no longer creatures of God; they are numbers in computers...If only the average, simple and God-fearing Muslim consumers of such food animals knew the gruesome details about the Westernised meat industry in their own Islamic countries, they would become vegetarians rather than eat such sacrilegious meat (44-45).

With regard to a vegetarian foodway specifically, Dahlan-Taylor references Foltz, whose approach adds to the above responses in appealing to similar ethical principles found in non-Islamic systems, as well as historical hermeneutics (“Beyond” 55). Foltz submits that one must take into consideration the historical context of seventh-century Arabia as the nascence of Islamic dietary laws. He argues that modern day methods of livestock production and slaughter have no parallel with the world in which Qur’anic prescriptions on meat were delineated. He asserts that the contemporary consequences of the meat industry, including the devastation of entire ecosystems, the dedication of land to crops for livestock rather than people, and rising levels of obesity and disease did not exist fourteen-hundred years ago. Foltz instead looks to Islamic ethical principles which

include “human health, social justice, ecological stewardship, and compassion toward non-human creation” as fulcrums upon which a vegetarian lifestyle might be based in Islam (“Vegetarianism”). These ethical principles of Islam are parallel with many of the Western secular arguments put forward for vegetarianism. Moreover, Foltz concedes that although the West is responsible for many of the “most egregious forms of institutionalized violence against animals,” the West has also “generated the most sophisticated critiques of the kind of unexamined anthropocentrism that has made such crimes morally acceptable” (*Animals* 7). Foltz is hopeful that other cultures “may yet prove willing to investigate and integrate some of the West’s critical responses as well, in concert with those generated from within the value systems of their own communities” (7). He considers it “not inconceivable” that in moving forward Islamic scholars may discourage meat-eating, and critique factory farming as “incompatible with the clearly established Islamic principles of compassion towards animals” (“Vegetarianism”). He also proposes that “Muslims committed to ethical vegetarianism” might offer alternative interpretations to Qur’anic verse which are traditionally cited in support of eating meat (“Vegetarianism”).

The liberal contextual argument put forward by Foltz, Masri, Ramadan, and al-Attar, contrasted with an adaptive interpretation of meat consumption raises, in Dahlan-Taylor’s view, a debate on what constitutes the “essence” of Islamic dietary laws. The halal industry taken as a broad whole “continues to be defined by religious scholars according to proscriptions in the Qur’an,” and considers the fulfillment of Islamic requirements for slaughter sufficient to ensure the permissibility of meat (al-Attar 64). In this perspective, “essence” lies in “a formalist, technical approach to slaughter,” but,

more importantly, can function as a divide between the sacred and secular, a “discursive construction” that expresses the “politics of belonging and exclusion” (Mukherjee 22). The liberal contextual approach in contrast challenges “the compatibility of industrial animal farming with Islamic values in general” and considers the context of the laws with modern day methods of food production and global consequences therein (Dahlan-Taylor “Barbarity” 357). The “essence” here lies with the “spirit” of dietary laws in concert with broader Islamic ethical principles as well as Western ethical discourse. The liberal contextual approach emphasizes shared values “within a framework of secular ethics,” not discounting the importance of Islamic textual sources, “but as an attempt to redraw the boundaries of applicability of the dietary laws” (“Beyond” 54; 47).

The distinction of these approaches is relevant for this project from two angles: firstly, those who would challenge my interviewees’ vegetarian/vegan lifestyles offer justifications similar to those which would fall under the adaptive response category, and emphasize that meat-eating *is* very much Islamic. Conversely, the liberal contextual approach is echoed in many of my interviewees justifications for being vegetarian, who cite that the current system of production “is in no way halal” or in line with values informed by both Islam and other ethical systems.

Secondly, embedded in my research questions is investigation of how a vegetarian foodway “fits” within an individual’s Islamic framework. Similarly, and at the macro-level, the modern day meat industry raises the question of where do Islamic ethics “fit” within the larger globalized food production system, as well as with new food technology and methods. As al-Attar sums up Moosa, “an important question [that] needs to be addressed...is whether matters of secular and scientific nature can and ought to be

primarily decided by teaching and inspirations that are derived from revelation” (al-Attar 69). How do Muslims, as Moosa asks, “account for temporal differences in inherited teachings” with the present day (Moosa 140)? What are the ethical values of Islam to be put into place in variant political and economic circumstances that do not preclude other ethical principles, and who makes those decisions?

I submit that a study focused on a vegetarian foodway in conjunction with Islam provides answers to some of these questions from the micro-level of individual experience. And, critically, I argue that an Islamic vegetarian discourse may serve as a site of reflection and discussion at the macro-level among sometimes competing ethical approaches. Why does this matter? The previous section demonstrated the ways in which the eating of permissible meat contributes to maintenance of Islamic identity. The conflation of food with identity, particularly with regard to halal, can be antagonistic as much as it can be a means of solidarity. Halal has emerged as a key subject of debate in non-Muslim countries, and the responses from both Muslims and others will steer the discourse to one that is either constructive or divisive. Vegetarianism discourse can thus serve as a kind of “bridge” for the inclusive ethics called for by the above scholars but that is at once theologically-grounded.

The Power of Commensality: Transcending Ideological Boundaries

As discussed in the first section, vegetarianism as a movement is primarily a Western phenomenon. And while there may be cases of those individual Muslims who choose vegetarianism based on their interpretation of Islamic precepts, it is more likely that it is “new ideas about animals and ecology” that “change how contemporary believers construct religio-ethical norms” (Ali 280). As Ali notes, Muslim advocacy for

vegetarianism frequently comes from those educated or living in the West (280). There is no Islamic imperative to eschew meat and, contrarily, there exist strong arguments against being a Muslim vegetarian (or vegan). Thus, while an Islamic argument for vegetarianism may draw from and reinterpret theological precepts, it is more typical that the rejection of meat is considered from a modern perspective and then read “back into foundational religious sources” (280). This necessitates engagement with Western ethical principles in conjunction with Islamic ethics. An Islamic conception of vegetarianism can accede to an adaptive response in adhering to Islamic precepts and identity, while at the same time appealing to larger issues of injustice in the food system, not in spite of Islam, but because of and supported by Islam. Circling back to Ali’s critique, the label of “vegetarian” need not preclude one’s identity as Muslim, but rather call attention to systematic injustice, emphasizing “ethics” rather than “Islamic” (283).

With regard to halal, the comprehensive ethical framework of a vegetarian argument is important due to the fact the transnational nature of halal has rendered it a locus of racial and religious tension in the Occident. The marketplace has evolved into a space which manifests not only consumer culture, but national culture (20). As Hirschman and Touzani point out, food can become conceptualized as ideology, and may be intimately tied with religious and ethnic conflict because it is “tangible” (23; 27). Much as halal for Muslims may define and demarcate an Islamic space, halal may likewise be employed as a marker of “social segregation and persecution” (27). Mukherjee points out that animal welfare has sometimes been instrumentalized in the name of political interests (32). Anti-halal groups, for example, may be characterized in part by anti-Muslim xenophobia, and “insist on the inherent cruelty of *zabiha* while Pro-

Halal groups not only defend their practices as more humane, but also accuse the opposition of...advancing the vegetarian agenda, western decadence, [and] culinary imperialism (32).⁵ Hirschman and Touzani's study examines the "Boycott Halal" social media movement which is active in several Western nations.⁶ Analysis of the media content revealed that Muslim consumers "are seen by some as an 'advance guard' bent on taking over the traditional culture and replacing it with Sharia law" (Hirschman and Touzani 20). In the U.K. in 2014, the disclosure that all of the chicken of one pizza company was halal sparked "halal hysteria," with some in the media arguing that the British conventional method of slaughter was inherently humane compared with the "inhumanity" of halal slaughter without stunning, with many calling for a boycott of the company (Vallely; Azad). EU regulations derogate stunning, however, the growing halal market, increasing export of halal meat to other countries, and lack of consistency among halal certifying bodies about halal slaughter has "raised significant concerns about the welfare of farm animals at the time of killing," with many calling for a ban on religious slaughter (Miele 49). The banning of religious slaughter in Denmark in 2014 was interpreted by religious minorities as anti-Semitic and Islamophobic (49). It should be noted that ethical issues of factory farming, including how animals are bred and raised before conventional slaughter, are seldom raised in public debates over religious slaughter. Mukherjee argues that objection to halal slaughter may indicate a more general opposition to Islam, much as arguments regarding the humaneness of halal slaughter by religious communities "is less about animals than it is about the exercising of religious

⁵ *Zabiha* literally translates as "slaughter" in Arabic and refers only to the literal act of slaughter; it is apart from the broader processes and proscriptions which render meat halal.

⁶ United States, Canada, Great Britain, Denmark, France, Australia, and New Zealand (Hirschman and Touzani 20).

rights and the governance of food and immigrant populations”(34). In the discourse of halal, animal rights and welfare may thus serve as a collision point between “cultural and religious recognition” and “green politics, national identity, multiculturalism, orientalist phobia, and the limits of tolerance” (32). A means in which to engage with halal that is unifying rather than polarizing could be a valuable step forward.

To my mind, a vegetarian argument offers a space in which to merge common ethical principles that counter preoccupation with religious identity as well as fear of Islam as an oppositional force. For those advancing the liberal contextual argument, the danger lies in the privileging of Islamic identity, or in asserting the superiority of Islam, to other ethical systems. Ali states that “arguments that stress the ‘Islamic’ nature of meat abstention or vegetarianism are pulling in the wrong direction,” and it is expedient to recognize “compatibility and overlap than to try to shoehorn considerations that emerge from contemporary circumstances into restrictively ‘Islamic’ ways of talking and thinking about ethics” (282). Ali argues for a “useful engagement with humanistic and ethical discourses from outside Islam” (281). Much in that the meat industry is a “common practical concern,” al-Attar suggests that “focus should be on reason and common ethical principles rather than religious texts, which might not be universally accepted and might not even be accepted by the adherents of closely related religions such as the three Abrahamic traditions” (69). To be clear, debates about food ethics and modern food production should be informed by the specific circumstances of ethno-religious communities (55). However, this “does not preclude the potential for an inclusive universal language and transcultural framework of ethical principles that

provide an opportunity for a dialogue between people belonging to different cultures, traditions, and religions” (al-Attar 55).

Willis Jenkins, whom I earlier noted links food movements to the ways humans “renegotiate” their relationship to nature and the planet, observes that the Abrahamic traditions “had such nuanced food rules precisely because they all knew the power of the table; commensality creates community” (76). Referencing Ali’s argument, Jenkins considers that becoming vegetarian “diminishes” one’s performance of Islam as identity in favor of an “eco-halal concern for animals and ecology” (75-76). However, Islamic identity “is not sublimated to the planetary” because Islamic virtues of “self-scrutiny, hospitality, and moderation” are contextualized in “the development of globally concerned food practices” (74-5). Thus, fundamental Islamic values endure, but are made manifest in opposition to an unjust food regime. Furthermore, Jenkins argues that food movements like vegetarianism that are informed by global/ethical concerns can subvert national and ideological boundaries: “global environmental relations exert pressure on the maintenance of particular identities, which may give rise to notions of virtue inflected by cross-border ecological relations”(76). Thus, in some sense, a vegetarian foodway can itself be a site of commensality, generating community through shared ethical values.

The study of Islam and vegetarianism then must stand against this broader background of Islamic food ethics on the one hand and global ethics and issues of geopolitics and food justice on the other. The above establishes a context in which to situate how individuals grapple with their religious tradition, Islamic identity, and modern conceptions and interpretations of food ethics. Apart from health motivations, justifications for vegetarianism must necessarily address particular ethical issues of

contemporary food production. Whether one focuses on animal welfare, the environment, or labor justice, each represents modern concerns which must be, for Muslims, contextualized in accordance with the dietary laws of the Qur'an. They present, as Moosa states, a "hermeneutical challenge" in making sense of past teachings and traditions with modern lived reality (140). It is from this standpoint that I propose that a vegetarian argument within an Islamic context operates as a site from which to consider larger ethical questions in a globalized world. The individuals I interview present their own particular views of the various ways in which they reconcile Islam with their own modern-day concerns.

Novelty of Study and Conclusion

There are three key areas in which this thesis aims to address the gaps in the above surveyed scholarship. Firstly, the literature on vegetarianism is overwhelmingly grounded in the context of contemporary, secular, individualistic Western culture. Scholars such as Twigg, Hamilton, Zeller, and others maintain that vegetarianism functions to provide the meaning, identity, and community that is lacking in modern secular society, or is no longer fulfilled by traditional religion. As Hamilton explains, "those concerns which may have once oriented people towards traditional or straightforwardly religious solutions today orient them towards various 'secular' forms of salvation" (Hamilton et al. 508). Matthew Ruby cautions that such a bias leaves the "cross-cultural generalizability of the literature open to question" (Ruby 142). In his review of the extant literature of over one-hundred articles on vegetarianism, many of them cited here, Ruby highlights the "limited cultural scope" of investigations into vegetarian foodways (142). He concludes that:

given the moral components that often underlie the practice of vegetarianism, it would be highly informative to extend the present research to include... collectivistic cultures... By thus expanding the scope of the literature beyond Western, individualistic cultures, the field stands to gain a far more nuanced understanding of the associated psychological phenomena, from motivations for and perceptions of vegetarianism, to intersections with gender and socioeconomic status, to omnivore-vegetarian differences in values, attitudes, and worldviews (149).

In another review surveying nearly two decades of literature on food spanning multiple disciplines, Mintz and DuBois note the vast range of extensive material pertains to the West, but conclude that “much remains to be done in exploring foodways in other areas of the world” (111). Similarly, in those studies that employ lived religion as a methodology, the bulk of geographical coverage is largely limited to North America and Europe (in Ammerman’s analysis of sixty-four articles, just one focused on Africa, and none on the Middle East; eight addressed Islam.) Ammerman views this disparity as “an invitation to think about the religiosities and secularities of the people of color and populations in the parts of the world not included among these dispatches” (“Emerging” 5). This project, with its focus on vegetarian foodways in a non-Western, collectivistic culture such as Egypt, represents a significant contribution to the study of vegetarianism as a phenomenon and a movement, and to food studies generally, as well as to lived religion as a field of study.

Secondly, Ruby states that there is a dearth of research connecting vegetarianism to other factors of motivation beyond health and ethics, such as religion (144). One scholar charges that “sociological investigations of religion have rarely included exploration of the health logic and food practices of religious groups, especially the minority groups that recommend a vegetarian nutritional career” (Nath 356). Although there is no vegetarian prescription in our focus of Islam, and Islam does not fall under the

rubric of groups referenced by Nath, his observation parallels Ruby's critique of vegetarian studies, where the role of food is neglected in contemporary investigations of mainstream religions, and research that is focused on the spiritual/religious themes of "de-institutionalised" movements in the West rarely account for food practices (356).

Finally, there is a lack of research on Islamic foodways generally. Although increasing attention is being paid to halal food as a global industry, there is otherwise very little contemporary scholarship on food from an Islamic perspective, and what research has been done tends to be on Muslim immigrant and minority communities in the West (Dahlan-Taylor 2015; Rouse and Hoskins 2004). To my knowledge, there has been no scholarly undertaking of the Islamic implications of a non-religious foodway, and certainly not vegetarianism, among actual Muslim practitioners, much less in an Islamicate culture or Middle Eastern/North African society.

In closing, as noted above, advocacy for vegetarianism frequently comes from those educated or living in the West (Ali 280). And although there is a growing number of Arabic-language resources, much of the information on vegetarianism--health, ethical, or otherwise--originates out of Western (English) popular discourse. Because the "emerging consciousness" of Muslims to ethical issues tied to vegetarianism strongly reflect Western influences, it is important to understand how individuals fit those values and practices within their own religious framework (Foltz "She-camel" 155). The necessity, therefore, as we have done, of outlining the spiritual underpinnings of a vegetarian foodway outside of the religious context of Islam, especially given that there is no scriptural compulsion to eschew meat in general, and that, contrarily, there exist strong arguments against being a Muslim vegetarian, is essential for situating the present

undertaking. The methodological approach of lived religion will take into account the extra-Islamic influences of an individual's chosen foodway, keeping in mind the spiritual implications that are attached to vegetarianism as a lifestyle, the influences carried over from Western popular discourses on vegetarianism, as well as the subjective belief systems of those who are not only Muslim, but in some cases represent a syncretistic fusion of beliefs.

Chapter IV.

Methodology

This study is grounded in a qualitative methodology consisting of fifteen in-depth interviews with self-proclaimed vegan and vegetarian Muslims in Egypt. Additionally, it is informed and supplemented by extant data on social media regarding vegetarianism from pages with largely Egyptian or Muslim demographics. Data analysis was a progressive activity, where research and themes framed initial data collection, and were in turn shaped and refined by continuing observations and interviews.

Because this research was largely exploratory, the qualitative approach proved the most appropriate for engaging with a topic about which there is a dearth of information. Guided by the framework of lived religion, the open-ended questions and person-focused approach of the qualitative methodology allowed for a deep-dive into the strong connection of a particular and significant foodway like vegetarianism not only to personal spiritual beliefs, but to the connection of meat and Islam, and, subsequently, to the ways in which traditional doctrine may be reinterpreted in light of contemporary issues. This is no small contribution, for implications may extend more broadly to how individuals in an Islamicate context engage with and reframe their religious traditions in relation to ethics, and more global sociopolitical and environmental concerns.

Study Context

This research was conducted in the city of Cairo, Egypt. As emphasized in the previous chapters, no study to date concerning a vegetarian foodway has been undertaken

in a Middle East/North African country, nor a Muslim-majority country. Research on food habits among Muslims typically centers on minority communities in North America or Europe, and similarly the same geographical zone is featured in research on vegetarianism. Egypt is thus unique as a study context, and not least because of the centrality of meat in cultural and religious food practices.

Many of my participants were questioned by their families as to what they would actually eat once they declared their vegetarianism. This is interesting, given that many staples of the traditional Egyptian diet are entirely vegan, including *fuul*, a common breakfast dish of mashed fava beans, *tameyya* (falafel) also made of a fava bean base, and *koshary*, a mix of pasta, rice, and lentils with a spicy tomato sauce. Egyptian *meze* or starters are also typically vegan or vegetarian. Yet at celebratory meals, holidays, and ritual feasts, meat is often the centerpiece, and meat is normally offered at any meal with guests. For rural Egyptians, or those with limited income, red meat is not typically a regular part of the diet, but may be supplemented by fish or backyard chickens or pigeons, and is more commonly consumed on Fridays (the Islamic holy day) (Hassan-Wassef 905). However, as one scholar puts it “meat tends to be regarded as a status symbol or a prestige item for households with limited incomes,” and more affluent households tend to consume higher amounts of meat (906). This chimes with comments made by several interviewees that because meat and dairy are more expensive, and therefore symbols of wealth, they are often a key component of the diets of the middle- and upper-class.

While an in-depth look at the changes that have occurred in the traditional Egyptian diet is beyond the bounds of this study, it is worth mentioning that the rapid

modernization and industrialization in the latter half of the twentieth century had a profound impact. In brief, many of the “pillars” of the Egyptian food system, “high extraction bread, legumes, fresh dark green leafy vegetables, and other vegetables and fruits,” have been replaced by imported foods, fast food, and junk food. In addition to the combined decrease in nutritional value, and the subsidization of calorically-dense, low nutrient food like oil and sugar, there has been an “unaccustomed increase in the daily intake of animal proteins” (913). This “nutrition transition” as it is called, comprised of the shift to a Westernized diet coupled with rapid urbanization and accompanying urban lifestyle, has contributed to high rates of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes (Mowafi et al.14). Egypt, the most populous country in Africa, has over 97 million inhabitants, 20 million of whom reside in Cairo. A 2017 global study placed adult obesity in Egypt as the highest in the world at 35%, with over 62% of adults classified as overweight (“Health Effects” 19). Such rankings have brought attention to the prevailing health crises in Egypt, spawning greater attention to diet and nutrition.

There are no known estimates of the number of vegetarians in Egypt, although there exists a small but growing movement. The “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” Facebook page has, at the time of this writing, over 8,800 members (up from 7,000 members from this project’s proposal stage.). A similar page, “Plant-based Diet (Egypt)” has over 460,000 members. (It should be noted that the latter page has as one of its administrator’s Bassem Youssef, a relatively famous comedian, who gained fame as the “Egyptian Jon Stewart.”) Through these pages and other local venues, vegan and vegetarian events and pot-luck gatherings are periodically organized. Frequent announcements are shared when a new vegan product is discovered in a shop, and many

who travel abroad will offer to bring back extra food items that can't be found in Cairo. These pages serve then not only as a forum for discussion and online group, but a community that frequently transfers to in-person interaction.

There exists a minority Coptic Orthodox Community, about 10% of the population of Egypt, who observe fasting periods throughout the year, totaling 210 days. Called "*seyami*," this is often the term visiting foreigners or tourists are advised to use when looking for vegetarian food. These fasts are essentially vegan, with no meat or dairy products allowed, with the exception of fish. Thus there has been some availability of vegan and vegetarian alternatives, although not easily found in mainstream marketplaces.

An increasing amount of restaurants and locations offer vegan and vegetarian meals. Notably, these options are most prevalently available in areas of Cairo like Zamalek and Maadi (my own neighborhood) where lives the highest concentration of expats. However, given the delivery culture of Cairo where nearly every service offers 24-hour delivery, such options are broadly accessible. For my own part, I have noticed a marked difference in the availability of vegan and vegetarian products, from arriving in Cairo nine years ago to the one shop that offered powdered soy milk, to now multiple stores and venues offering imported and local vegan and vegetarian products, farmer's markets, and a trend toward "slow food," organic goods, and locally-sourced and sustainable products.

Overview of Participants

An overview of participants can be found in Table 1. Participants are aged between 19 and 50+, with the majority aged 30 and under, with 9 females and 6 males.

All participants are Egyptian, except for one from India who has lived for several years in Cairo for business purposes. Most of the Egyptian participants were born, raised, and based in Cairo; one participant was raised primarily in the United States with frequent visits to family in Alexandria, and another’s background was split between France and Egypt. Nearly all participants have some form of post-secondary education, and five of the participants are currently students.

Table 1 Participant Overview

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Profession/Education	Religious Affiliation	Religious Identity	Background
1	Zein	M	19	Student, Computer Science Ain Shams University, Cairo	Muslim	“Own version”	Cairo
2	Salma	F	35	Journalist; tour guide	Muslim	Spiritual	Cairo
3	Wael	M	26	Marketing and sales; TV guest	Muslim	Muslim; “all religions”	Cairo
4	Mahmoud	M	50+	Consultant; USAID	Muslim	Muslim	Cairo
5	Esraa	F	25	Studied pharmacy; private science teacher; Qur’an teacher	Muslim	Muslim	Cairo
6	Amira	F	37	Mother; grad/post-grad sociology	Muslim	Muslim	India; in Cairo for work purposes
7	Aya	F	25	Business owner (food), nutrition consultant, and recipe developer	Muslim	Spiritual	France; Egypt
8	Ali	M	27	Grad/post-grad computer engineering; tester for software engineering firm	Muslim	Agnostic	Cairo
9	Sally	F	34	Intellectual Property Law Attorney	Muslim	Muslim	USA; Egypt

10	Haytham	M	21	Pharmacy student, Cairo University	Muslim	“Not 100% Muslim”	Cairo
11	Karim	M	26	MA student computer engineering Ain Shams University	Muslim	Atheist	Cairo
12	Menna	F	19	Student, Undergrad English and Comparative Literature, AUC	Muslim	Agnostic/Muslim	Cairo
13	Iman	F	36	BA Accounting; MA Finance; freelance financial consultant	Muslim	Muslim	Cairo
14	Rasha	F	20	London-Royal Holloway University; managing and marketing degree	Muslim	Muslim	Cairo
15	Shaimaa	F	30	MA Economics; TA at Arab Academy	Muslim	Muslim	Cairo

All participants are nominally Muslim. To clarify, it is customary in Egypt that all children inherit their families’ religious identity at birth. Religious affiliation--either Muslim or Christian--is likewise noted on all Egyptian citizens’ national IDs. There exists no such “undeclared” or other religious status officially. Additionally, to publicly renounce Islam is considered apostasy, and can be a criminal offense. Thus while some participants may harbor doubt or ascribe to other belief systems, technically, at least insofar as being a citizen of Egypt, and how one presents oneself and behaves socially, they are outwardly Muslim.

As will be elaborated upon in chapter 6, my early correspondences included several people who declared themselves agnostic, atheist, or spiritual but not religious. I initially excluded these respondents, wishing to remain within the project parameters of practicing Muslims, however, once a small but significant pattern seemed to emerge, I re-considered and decided to include the variety of belief. Among the participants included

here, seven consider themselves practicing, believing Muslims. Others represent a considerable spectrum, from two who believe in Islam but in addition to other spiritual belief systems; two who consider themselves Muslim, but “with doubt” or “not 100%,” two who consider themselves spiritual; one agnostic, and one atheist.

Similarly represented was a range of diet and dietary adherence. Among the participants, four are vegetarian and five are vegan; a further four are vegetarian but are attempting to be vegan; and a final two follow a plant-based diet. Because the focus of this study was to understand why an individual is drawn to vegetarianism, and at what point, and in what ways, ethics, food, and faith converge, I do not, as in many quantitative studies, make a concerted distinction between “types” of vegetarianism, nor analyze the differing motivations, for example, between someone who gives up meat and someone who gives up meat and dairy. A vegan foodway is typically considered at the “extreme” end of the vegetarian spectrum; however, given this study’s specific cultural and religious context, abstention from meat is already a considerably anomalous act, and the giving up of other animal products, although practically more difficult, does not necessarily represent added or variant complications to social reception or popular conception.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection derived from two main areas: survey and analysis of extant data on social media regarding vegetarianism from pages with largely Egyptian or Muslim demographics; and in depth interviews with self-proclaimed vegan and vegetarian Muslims in Cairo.

Qualitative E-Research: Extant Data Analysis on Facebook

Primarily to help guide my research in its early stages, as well as to identify key themes and structure interview questions, I utilized of the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” Facebook page, as well as the more international “Vegan Muslim Society” page for a broader perspective. These pages served as invaluable sources for the questions, concerns, and topics which arise in members’ posts regarding the vegan/vegetarian lifestyle and Islam. As a researcher in this scenario, my role was as an “unobtrusive observer” in that I used the extant data in the form of public posts and discussions to formulate, shape, and clarify the particular issues which I discussed with my informants at the interview stage (Salmons 189).

The use of Facebook was integral as both a setting and a medium for ethnographic research. All vegetarian/vegan meet-ups in Cairo are organized via Facebook, whether through the above-mentioned page or other pages of Cairo-based venues and businesses. The page itself allows for open discussion and serves as an outlet for people who may not otherwise have a space in which to exchange their views. Many members turn to this online community for advice and support. The page thus proved a valuable tool for accessing some of the real-world concerns faced by Egyptian and Muslim vegetarians, and showed the ways in which such a forum offers a kind of community support, a component which was analyzed in the larger focus of my study.

The Facebook pages mentioned above are viewable by any Facebook member; one does not have to be an admitted member of the specific group to view posts or member names and profiles. It is reasonable to assume that, because all postings and profiles are publicly viewable, individuals knowingly make their own posts and

information publicly available. Within the thesis, any reference to public postings are anonymized to ensure the privacy of individual users.

In-Depth Interviews

As noted above, interviewees were solicited from the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” as well as the “Plant-Based Diet (Egypt)” Facebook pages. After procuring permission from the page’s administrators, I made a public post briefly describing my research role and focus, and requested that interested members contact me for further discussion (Appendix 1). From here, after personal communication regarding the project, any questions, and the informant’s initial thoughts, I arranged an in-person meeting at a café or meeting venue convenient to both parties. I forwarded a digital copy of the Informed Consent form to each participant before the meeting, and presented each with a hard copy to sign at the interview. I briefed each one on his or her right to skip questions or stop the interview at any time. Additionally, I asked all participants prior to the interviews if they would be comfortable with an audio recording of our conversation, assuring them that no one else would have access but me. I requested and received permission from each participant to audio-record the interview for accuracy. I also took detailed notes and contacted participants if necessary to clarify any ambiguous or missing information.

Following my initial posts in each group, I received messages from eighteen potential interviewees. A follow-up post one month later yielded a further thirteen interested participants. In total, I engaged in direct communication with thirty-six interested participants, although many did not culminate in interviews for a variety of

reasons, primarily due to logistical difficulties in timing, location, and travel, with a few simply not following up on communication.

Of the fifteen interviews, three were conducted via Skype, following the above-described protocol. One interview, as per the participant's preference, was conducted via email. Of the remaining in-person interviews, all but one (which took place in the interviewee's home) were held at the Osana Wellness Center, a café and local hub for holistic treatments, yoga classes, and recent site of several vegetarian-centered events, either outdoors in the garden or inside the café. Participants were told the interviews would last roughly 1-1.5 hours. Actual interview time ranged from thirty-five minutes to just over two hours, with the average time at just under one hour.

The interviews were person-centered and semi-structured, guided by a series of open-ended questions (Appendix 3). I had initially compiled a list of questions which were specific and somewhat leading (Appendix 2). Although I ended up grouping and eliminating these questions into the more open-ended and broader format as seen in Appendix 3, I forwarded my original set of questions to participants prior to the interview. My reason for this was that I found in a number of correspondences that the religious/Islamic focus of my project was sometimes "missed" by the respondents. While the discussion of food is relatively uncontroversial, religion can be a sensitive subject. I wanted to be sure I was expressing clarity as to the nature of the project and the questions entailed, and that the participant was comfortable discussing both Islam and their personal spiritual beliefs. The actual interview process was more exploratory, with a view to maintain the focus on the individual and his or her experience with food, Islam and spiritual identity.

All correspondence and interviews were conducted in English.

The study design originally included focus group discussions as a component of data collection, a format which I eventually abandoned. While I intended to seek out individuals for one-on-one interviews from the start, I did not anticipate that I would reach my goal of twelve to fifteen participants without some support or affiliation with a known venue which often sponsors pot-lucks or events centered around vegetarianism. Given that my plan was to recruit potential participants via Facebook, I could not predict the kind of response I would receive; not only was I reaching out somewhat blindly to thousands of members, but I was a foreigner, hoping to discuss the sometimes sensitive subject of religion, albeit in the frame of vegetarianism. I had thought the option of a group discussion might, at the outset, provide a greater level of comfort and increase the number of potential interviewees, as well as engender a snowball sampling among other potential subjects in the community. However, immediately following my first post, I received messages from thirteen interested participants, as well as numerous comments, with members describing their own beliefs and experiences, tagging other potential interviewees, or offering advice about where I might find more information. While I did reach out to one key venue about hosting a pot-luck focus group (Osana Wellness Center) it never came to fruition, and the response and connections I received through Facebook proved sufficient for the data necessary for the project.

In the Informed Consent form, participants were given the option of choosing a pseudonym. Only one participant requested the use of a pseudonym; all other participants were comfortable with the use of their actual names. However, upon further reflection, I decided to assign pseudonyms to all participants. Although careful provisions have been

taken throughout the course of the project to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant, the sometimes sensitive nature of religious discussion in Egypt bears consideration. While there is nothing inherently “incriminating” in the data, views or perspectives which could be construed as anti-Islamic can be a point of contention, and even, in extreme cases, a criminal offense. All names have therefore been changed.

Data Analysis

I personally transcribed each interview. As the research data was manageable, I did not make use of any software in the analyzing process. I printed off and coded the transcribed interviews, highlighting firstly the key words and concepts of four broad identified categories. I then constructed an alphabetized key of sixteen concepts, and notated all words and concepts corresponding to the key. I then grouped concepts together into thematic categories pertaining to the research questions, and noted outliers. The process was thus quite fluid, being guided by larger preconceived themes, and then reconstructed with other emergent themes and grouped accordingly.

Positionality

My positionality here is somewhat nebulous in that I am both an insider and an outsider. I have lived and worked in Cairo since 2009; I am a vegetarian; I am myself a member of “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” Facebook page, and I participate in some of the local vegetarian events held in the area. And although my research did not comprise traditional ethnographic structure in the sense of prolonged immersion in the field, nor the intent to explicitly gain “insider” status, my time here contributed to an ethnographic-like experience in terms of personal interactions, language acquisition, and

cultural encounters (Cresswell 13). On the other hand, and quite more starkly, I am an outsider in that I am neither Egyptian, Muslim, nor a native Arabic speaker. Employing the self-reflexivity of ethnographic research, I was compelled to cultivate awareness of potential biases based on what is both an etic and emic perspective.

As a long-time practicing vegetarian (and sometime vegan,) I have a sensitivity to and familiarity with some of the motivations and challenges connected to a lifestyle that avoids animal products. Given that I myself was a member of the groups from which I recruited, assumptions may have been made about my own vegetarianism, which may have served to legitimate my interest in the topic and access to subjects. It allowed for an empathic and informed understanding of some of the issues faced, and helped to contour more pointed and relevant questions.

Caution, however, was warranted in how I presented or projected my own narrative. Firstly, and most obviously, I kept at the forefront of my approach the notion that there may not be any clear parallels between my own and an informant's experience. One must be wary of taking for granted any foundational similarities simply because we have each chosen to follow a similar practice. It was my intention and challenge to remain cognizant of and avoid assumptions from both sides, and to resist my own inclination to "overshare;" my task was to exhibit some sense of understanding and rapport, yet maintain distance as a researcher. I was therefore careful in interviews not to present my own dietary practice at the outset, to keep the focus on the participant's experience. At the end of the interviews, most people asked about my own diet, at which point I was happy to share.

A similar balance needed to be struck regarding any assumption of cultural knowledge either of Egypt or Islam. Although I am married into an Egyptian family, and have my own intimate experiences with the culture and religion, my acquaintance is nevertheless limited and particular. The familiarity I had was an advantage both in fostering relationships with subjects and in steering subsequent conversations, but I acknowledged the need to extend my inquiry beyond suppositions based on my personal experience of living in Cairo.

Limitations and Concerns

A major limitation to my research is the fact that I am not a fluent Arabic speaker. While I have basic conversational skills, it is not at the level needed either for research purposes or interviews. This necessarily limited prospective subjects to English speakers, and my research to English language text. For the purposes of this study, however, the language barrier proved not to be a considerable disadvantage. The majority of the posts on the Facebook pages are conducted in English. Furthermore, most of the potential subjects with whom I had come into contact had at least a working knowledge of English, and typically a high degree of fluency. My familiarity as well with some of the Egyptian colloquialisms helped to bridge any language gaps.

I wish to point out also that I excluded Christian vegetarians from my study. While Christians represent a minority of the population of Egypt (estimated at around 10%,) there are vegans and vegetarians among them (“World Factbook: Egypt”). And as noted, Coptic Christians undergo a nearly vegan fast two-thirds of the year. While this represents possible future inquiry, the scope of this project was limited to exploration of Islam and Muslim Egyptians.

A further limitation, or perhaps rather, a particularity of my research, is that my subjects are representative of a certain sub-set of Egyptian culture. These are individuals who are vegetarian by choice, not because of an inability to afford meat. Such a decision assumes a certain degree of affluence, in that it is influenced by factors that are decidedly well-outside the mainstream of Egyptian culture, indicating a level of education and access to information, as well as a means to support such a diet—particularly that of veganism—with imported and alternative meat, dairy, and “health food” products. Also, the fact that my target participants are tech-savvy, active on social media, generally fluent in English, and participate in what is largely an English-language forum and “alternative” events, indicates a somewhat higher socioeconomic status as compared to the majority of the Egyptian population.

A final concern, then, would be extrapolating conclusions from my small-sample group to larger Egyptian society or even the global Muslim population, at least insofar as, if my hypothesis proves correct that Egyptian Muslims must and do reconcile being vegetarian with Islam, it being indicative of a larger movement towards a reinterpretation of Islamic ethics in light of real world environmental issues and (secular) food ethics. While such a movement, or even reform, may be indicated, one must caution against the oversimplification that is often engendered about the “Muslim world” (Lewis 68). It is my goal, rather, that this study instead complements recent research and forays in the reinterpretation of Islam, such as that seen in feminist Islamic discourse, and add one angle to the prism, that is to say, how one particular sub-group in the Islamicate world adapts, enacts, and interprets their faith in a modern, interconnected global society.

Chapter V.

Vegetarianism, Meat, and Islamic Identity

Islam, whether claimed as a religious identity or not, and whether practiced or not, threads its way as a point of influence through multiple layers of the interviewees' experiences. This section delves into the relational context of Islam as manifested in the social interactions of participants. As lived religion scholars have noted, individual belief is at once private and public. Food as a shared activity brings forth beliefs and assumptions about "correct" ways of eating, whether in the realm of health, custom, or proper religious practice. This section utilizes largely the second angle of the lived religion approach as outlined for this project, engaging with Islam as the "official" religion of this study's setting of Egypt. The focus here connects with both the first and second sections of the literature review; perceptions of meat-eating among participants and their social circles recall Islamic proscriptions around meat, as well as the ways in which such dietary laws and food practices connect with conceptions of self, identity and belonging, the human-non-human dynamic, and the hierarchy of relations in the cosmological paradigm.

With a view to recognize the larger sociocultural context and influence and role of Islam in individual food choice, I begin first by examining the reported reactions--as perceived by the participants--of others to their vegetarian or vegan foodways. I then analyze the responses, and how participants explain, present, and justify their diet to others. I conclude with a discussion of key findings.

This section is meant to address my first two research questions: how do Muslims in Cairo, Egypt frame, adapt, and justify their choice to be vegetarian or vegan within their Islamic faith, or religious/spiritual beliefs? What are the implications of such a divergent food practice on social relationships within the family and among friends and the wider community? During our interviews I asked open-ended questions as to how the participants explained their approaches to food to others, and the responses and reactions of people. To be clear, given this study's focus, I also asked more pointed questions about the reactions of meat-eaters as pertains to Islam. Thus the responses here may be over-representative of the extent to which religion is a paramount or contentious issue for Egyptian Muslim vegetarians. However, although there is variance in individual interactions per this topic, it is significant that all but two participants encountered some form of resistance from others on Islamic grounds.

Reported Reactions

Of my respondents, just over one-quarter reported confrontation over the appropriateness of being vegetarian as a practicing Muslim from immediate family members. Families were generally more concerned with the health of the individuals, or worried about eating together on a daily basis, and continuing certain food traditions at larger family gatherings.

The questioning of the Islamic correctness or legitimacy of participants' vegetarian choices, however, was faced by nearly all participants, some from family, but more typically from extended family, work colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers. Reactions ranged from benign curiosity to vehement resistance and hostility, with accusations of being counter to Islam. These reactions reflect many of the traditionalist

interpretations outlined in chapter 3, where the “letter of the law” proved paramount in enacting food choices. These reactions are also an indicator of the extent to which all of my interviewees, regardless of their personal spiritual and religious frameworks and religious identities, were compelled to engage with the Islamic “soundness” of their food choices, if only in the context of explanation and debate.

Health

More than half of the respondents reported familial support for their food choices. Overall, such accommodation was typically related to interests of health, either where health reasons were the initial impetus for cutting out meat and/or dairy, or where the noticeably-improved health of the participants became evident, and even inspirational, to family members. Shaimaa reports that while her friends “make fun” of her vegetarianism all the time, her family is very supportive, with her step-mother often making vegan meals, and her father discontinuing the tradition of slaughter during ‘Eid. Sally, while staying for two years with her extended family in Alexandria, gradually eased them into the transition of eating a plant-based diet, primarily to combat many of the chronic illnesses suffered by family members. She proudly reports that at the end of two years, the ‘Eid feast was entirely vegan except for some fish, missing the standard meat-heavy dishes.

An equal number of participants indicated health concerns as a challenge to their conversion, with many family members arguing that meat and dairy are essential for a proper diet. Amira and Karim report having had meat snuck into their food by family members, although both admit that it was done with good intentions. Many were told by their families they wouldn’t find anything to eat, or as Esraa laughingly states “They

think you're going to die of malnutrition." Wael reports that in his first month of his being vegan, family called him every hour to make sure he was still alive. Some families, upon seeing the improved health of the participants, were convinced to make an effort to follow in their stead. Wael says that after one year of being vegan and suffering no illness, his family is now trying to imitate him. Others more typically admitted that while they understood both the ethical reasoning for giving up meat as well as the health benefits, they were simply unable to do so.

As Counter to Islam

While health emerged as a strong issue, it was exceeded in this study by people's reaction to giving up meat as contrary to Islam. All but two participants, who primarily presented their foodways from a health perspective, encountered opposition to their food choices as against Islam. Most indicated that objections came less so from close family, but rather extended family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The common rejoinder to a declaration of vegetarianism for my interviewees was that if meat was "bad" it would have been forbidden by God, or that one should not refuse that which God deemed halal:

Shaimaa: With my friends at work, when they're cornered with all the logic behind me not eating chicken or meat anymore, they go to the part where 'God said so in the Qur'an.'

Rasha: That's the first question they ask--so do you think it's haram to eat animals? Do you think it's completely wrong to be slaughtering animals? ...Other things people have mentioned...You are trying to prove that something is wrong when it's halal.

Menna: A cousin...said if God gave us animals to eat, why do you not eat them?

Karim: The first thing [they say] is that God allowed it, God wants us to do it. This is the first reaction I've encountered.

Zein: They simply say if it was bad it should be forbidden, in the religion.

Haytham: Some say that I am forbidding something God did not forbid, which is as sin.

Ali: My mother... Would cite a verse in the Qur'an in which God is saying people shouldn't forbid His gifts to us, and people who do that aren't held in high regard. So this was a very strong argument for her. And this was one of the primary principles in which she rejected my choice, that if God allowed it, then it's ok.

Salma tells a story of attending an Islamic conference in Iran as part of an Egyptian delegation. While at a dinner where she requested just salad and rice, she recounts the following exchange with an Egyptian professor seated at her table:

'What are you doing? Why don't you eat the meat?' I told her I don't like meat and I stopped eating a long time ago. She told me 'it's haram. What are you doing? God will be angry from you. You refuse the meat at this holy place? It's not something good for you.' And she was trying to explain to me that even if you have a problem, if you have something inside your body, God will help you if you eat this meat from here. Ok, some Muslims think like this, it's haram to refuse the meat. But I didn't eat it. And she was really angry.

Coming from a geographically different angle, Amira reports that in India, "you cannot be Muslim and not eat meat." She would receive comments, for example, from Hindu peers, in jest, "Oh your faith is not intact;" or "you are not a Muslim; how can you be a Muslim and not eat meat?"

Association with Belief Systems Other Than Islam

A less common but equally significant response was expressed in the fear of associating with a belief system other than Islam. Rasha makes reference to her father who, while supportive, questioned if there was something in Islam she was against. She offers the example of different days designated for fasting for Jews and Muslims as indicative of a distinction between the two religions. Her father cautioned her to be

careful she was not associating herself with another religion, which prompted her own in-depth exploration of being vegetarian and Muslim.

Others pointed to the association of veganism or vegetarianism with agnosticism and atheism. Karim, although he admits he engaged in other behavior that may have indicated that he was drifting from his family's faith, says his mother asked him, "in a sarcastic manner" if he was an atheist. "It's halal," he explains. "Why would I stop eating [meat]?...Because it's very Islamic to eat meat."

Salma describes uneasy interactions at work with colleagues over her food choices, who she says start to talk and gossip, saying "It's not something good, Allah will be angry from you, it's not good to refuse something that God has granted to us." She explains: "they think about the atheists. They [atheists] do a lot of crazy things...they don't worship God, they don't worship Islam, so they even don't like to eat what Allah has given to us; Allah has granted us all these animals to eat them, and to be healthy by eating them, so they have already deprived themselves from being healthy."

Wael claims in Egypt "Atheist now is synonymous to vegan." When I asked him to expand on that connection, he explains:

Because all religions apparently support meat. So when you say a cow has feelings, they will say God knows that a cow has feelings and God says we must kill it. So you are not better or merciful than God. So by being merciful, they think that you are saying that you are more merciful than God who created these beings. Some of my friends say to me that cows and animals don't have feelings, but certain [ones] have feelings, like dogs. Cows don't have feelings. And for that reason God said to us to kill them.

As Islamic Practice

Just one respondent, Esraa, reported that people assumed she was avoiding meat for the purpose of worship. Referring to the term *zuhd*, literally meaning "detachment,"

the concept denotes a kind of asceticism, where although believers should partake of the pleasures in life, piety and abstention from luxuries is encouraged: “it’s like abstaining from all lusts, you don’t go after things that you really like, not to be distracted from your worship.”

Overall, the reactions of the participants’ social circles very much reflect the more traditionalist interpretation of the Qur’an as described in chapter 3. Abstention from meat may be construed as a denial of God’s revelation; believers should consume lawful foods in gratitude, lest they presume to counter divine commandments. The reasoning faced by nearly all respondents, namely that if God allowed meat, then it is a good thing and should be eaten, or that it is an impious act to not eat meat, calls for careful consideration and attention as to how one should answer these reactions. It is in this sense, as I argue in this thesis, regardless of one’s personal spiritual or religious beliefs, being vegetarian in a Muslim society often necessitates engagement and deep familiarity with Islam itself.

The Responses

The responses of participants’ to the questions, concerns, and criticisms of people in their lives speaks to the ways in which foodways, and one’s justification or reasoning for a particular food practice, can be shaped by the immediate surroundings of an Islamicate culture. Thus, while there exist a myriad of influences which may inspire a vegetarian foodway, the responses below reveal how participants’ must adapt their explanations and justifications to people’s reception of their diets.

The majority of participants (80%) actively engaged with others in response, most typically addressing issues of health, and sometimes environmental issues, first, and then

utilizing arguments based in Islam. Corresponding to the above described reactions, most arguments were heavily weighted toward justifications found in Islam.

The below discourses were in answer to the question as to how the participants explained their diets to other people. I was not looking for direct responses to the reactions of others, but rather probing to see what issues floated to the surface more generally in their relational explanations. Thus what follows is not necessarily representative of the participants' primary reasons for a vegetarian/vegan foodway, but rather what they offer as defense of or explanation to others.

Health-Related Response

Sixty-percent of respondents actively engaged with reactions due to health concerns, often citing scientific research or their own health improvements as arguments for a plant-based and/or vegetarian/vegan foodway. Mahmoud expresses pride in his lifestyle, and says he continually talks about the health gains he has experienced, in the hopes that others will benefit as well. Esraa responds to queries about her food choices with research and her own improvements in digestive problems and food allergies. Menna created an Instagram account with vegan recipes, and says that she feels like it is her “duty to show them options... Because it’s so hardwired in the culture to have animal products in every meal.”

Avoid Discussion

One-quarter of respondents generally avoided explanations of their dietary choices, primarily to prevent conflict. Rather than engaging in potentially antagonistic conversations, Salma, who above noted hostility from questioning colleagues, explains to

others simply that she is on a diet and trying to lose weight. At family gatherings, sometimes in the face of anger for refusing to eat the offered meat, she would say she was under doctor's orders for a health condition to avoid meat. They think, she explains that meat or chicken is the best thing that can be offered to a guest; to refuse it is considered a great offense.

Iman admits that in the beginning stages she was very enthusiastic to tell people, but now she doesn't "advocate that much." She adds: "People are just too resistant...you can really sense it here in Egypt. When you talk to anyone, they know it all; you get into too much arguments that are just useless for me."

Haytham, when challenged by an argument that he is being sinful for "forbidding something God did not forbid" prefers to guard his beliefs rather than deal with "unnecessary conflicts." "I don't usually reply to those things even though I have a very solid reply to each, because I don't waste time in long arguments that won't lead to anything... because in Egypt, if you said your beliefs in certain topics, especially your religious beliefs, you will get judged, refused, and sometimes bullied."

Reading Back into Islam

Several participants noted that "it depends" on the person or situation, and how amenable he or she is to discussion as to how they explain their dietary practice. As Sally says, "you have to change up how you talk to people; there's no one argument for anybody." More than half of the respondents (53%) reported engaging directly with Islam as a feature of their responses, although they typically begin with health arguments before addressing religion.

Wael: I start always with the health issue, by following a plant-based diet. I cannot start with the religious aspects. I will be in a war with them... So I avoid argument. I use studies and research that is done about a plant-based diet, and then I talk about environmental aspect. And from this point, I tell them that in Islam there is a hadith that says 'don't harm yourself or anyone or the environment'... So in the past they were just 20,000 Arabs and two cows, so it was not polluting the earth. But now they became billions, so now its haram, now it's forbidden... I am just using their own beliefs to change their point of view. They have that we must not kill a sheep in front of another sheep, and it's not applied now. They have slaughterhouse. So if you are traditional Muslim, you must kill each sheep alone. It's not practical now; you must kill hundreds in a second as a supply for meat consumption.

Ali similarly explains that it "Depends on the other person's background. I try not to talk about with somebody who I think wouldn't be very understanding ... Usually I get people by the health reason, but then I don't hide that I do it for ethical reasons." He centers his argument on the fact that the cycle of animal husbandry is no longer natural: "cattle are the way they are right now because of thousands of years of selective breeding, and cows didn't produce that much milk, and they didn't used to have that percentage of meat in them." He makes it clear that he is not opposed to killing animals for meat, but he has "strong opposition to the inhumane practices of the meat industry."

Aya, Zein, Sally, Rasha, Amira, and Menna all likewise mention the differing climate, geography, and conditions that impacted the procurement of and rules around sustenance in the context of seventh-century Arabia, as compared to the modern-day global access of mass-produced meat and other food. Meat, they say, is no longer necessary to survive; the conditions in which animals were required and raised at the time of the birth of Islam no longer exist.

In a similar vein, many respondents add that meat-eating is not a must; that while one *can* eat meat, one doesn't *have* to eat meat. Amira says she struggled for years with

the fact that meat-eating is permitted in Islam, until she concluded from own careful study and contemplation of the Qur'an that meat-eating is not obligatory:

I tried to collect the points that suit my ideology. I'm a strong believer in Allah, but at the same time, A. This is not the way animals are to be slaughtered. B. It is not mandatory for me to eat meat, as long as I'm following the other five principles of Islam. C. It says you *can* eat meat, and under these circumstances. And look at these things, all that is wrong with the world, this is not the way you treat an animals.

Others cite the recommended emulation of the Prophet Muhammad as reason to cut back on meat. Rasha and Menna mention that the Prophet's diet was mostly plant-based. Similarly to the above, they connect this to the climate and conditions of the Arabian peninsula at the Prophet's time. Menna says "I came across a study that said the Prophet had 80% of his diet was plants...And even then when they did eat animals, animals used to belong to them, and they used to take care of them, it was all like a process of care...so when they did eat them, it was maybe once a month or even less. It's not like factory farming. It's not like what we do now." Rasha adds that her own research into the Prophet's diet made her more comfortable going vegan.

Sally explains that if religion is brought up as a competing point, she will talk about the *sunnah* diet of the Prophet.⁷ For example, she tells about an interaction with her aunt, where she was trying to convince her of a plant-based diet, showing her videos which talked about Muhammad being a vegetarian. Her aunt, angry, "went and got the Qur'an and showed me the verse of the animals we're allowed to eat. And I said ok, but you're not supposed to eat those every day, or every week. These are foods that were

⁷ *Sunnah* refers to the body of recorded traditions of the sayings, deeds, customs, and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad. The normative practice of Muhammad serves as an example for guidance for believing Muslims about how to best conduct themselves in daily life.

very rare to access back then. And I think she knows now bodies are not designed to handle this kind of thing every day, every meal.”

Another strong theme that emerged among many responses was that the way animals are currently raised and slaughtered is not halal. This featured less so as an argument explicitly presented to others, but is implicated in appeals to the differing circumstances of modern day meat-production and seventh-century Arabia, and is an issue considered by nearly all respondents upon further discussion. However, because halal features prominently in consideration of the ethical issues tied to slaughter in the modern context, I will examine this in depth in the following chapter.

Discussion

While religion does not necessarily determine a person’s attitudes towards animals and meat-eating, the viewpoints expressed by reactions to participants’ vegetarian foodways suggest that Islamicate culture plays a crucial role in defining opinions about proper and lawful ways to eat. For believing Muslims, the Qur’an is the timeless, universal, direct, and complete word of God. Denial of a permissible thing like meat has implications far beyond food; abstention from meat can indicate for some a rejection of the basic foundation of Islam, with “liberties” taken in interpretation and application that run adjacent to a denial of the Qur’an itself as divine revelation. Vegetarianism, then, not only can be seen as oppositional to dietary laws, but to the precept that *all* laws as laid out in the Qur’an are inviolable and infallible.

As noted in chapter 3, Islamic dietary laws have historically functioned to demarcate religious identity, and continue to do so in modern society. This study’s findings complicate the conclusions of research which centers on the importance of the

consumption of halal meat in minority contexts. As Ali, Mukherjee, and others have argued, halal meat operates as a distinctive symbol of Islamic identity, particularly among immigrant communities in a larger, non-Islamic culture. This study, albeit on a small scale, offers a slightly nuanced angle from which to consider food and Islamic identity. For in the context of Egypt, all meat is by default halal. There also is not the comparative pressure to define communal identity in contrast to an immediate non-Islamic environment. Yet, as the reported reactions indicate, meat-eating remains a distinctive praxis of Islamic identity.

The above discourse signifies the strong, almost inviolable association of meat-eating with Islamic identity. On the one hand, this confirms many scholars' observations discussed in chapter 3 regarding the preoccupation with the primacy of Islamic identity: meat-eating in the Egyptian context proves to be of correlative significance among Muslims in a majority setting as much as it is a delineating and defining factor for immigrant minority communities. On the other hand, however, this particular emphasis on identity merits reevaluation given two emergent themes of the reviewed discourse: the association of vegetarianism with atheism or another non-Islamic foodway, and the particular pressure that exists in Egypt to maintain an outward semblance of Islamic identity. These insights point not to prioritization of identity, although it remains important, but rather to the "bending" and adjustment of narrative to conform to social expectations of Islamic practice.

Meat and Islamic Identity in the Context of Egypt

The reactions as reported by participants--apart from health concerns--generally reference the "Islamic-ness" of eating meat, citing divine permission ("God gave us

animals to eat;” “God allowed it;” “God said so in the Qur’an”); that meat is deemed good by God in part because it is health-promoting (“if you have something inside your body, God will help you if you eat this meat); or accusatory, that in refusing meat, one is committing a sin, either by denying that which is halal, or by “trying to prove that something is wrong when it’s halal,” and conceiving of oneself as more merciful than God.

On their own, and in the context of open discussion, such reactions are not necessarily extraordinary; they are reflective of much of the mainstream interpretation of dietary laws as outlined in chapter 3, although they nevertheless oblige considerable thought and reasoning on the part of respondents. What casts these reactions in a slightly different light, however, is firstly, the added association among some of being vegetarian with another system of belief. Rasha, for example, undertook careful research after her father’s questioning of whether or not by becoming vegetarian she was affiliating herself with another religion. Her father’s concerns were related more to associating with another established religion, like Judaism or even Buddhism. More salient, however, are the connections drawn between vegetarianism/veganism and atheism. Given that “irreligion” is not only a social stigma but a criminal offense in Egypt, the association with vegetarianism therefore necessitates for those who are only nominally Muslim a measured navigation of religious discussion.

Secondly, there emerged in the interviews an undercurrent of sensitivity or caution alluded to by some in publicly addressing Islam. Thus even while practicing and devoted Muslims may undergo their own personal exploration in aligning Islamic dietary principles with vegetarian practice, how they present such arguments to others likewise

demands a careful construction of justifications which are concordant with traditional mainstream interpretations.

Thirdly, many interviewees admitted to being different, independent, or following their own way as opposed to the normative practices of their communities when it comes to food. Attached to this, however, was a sense of being marginalized in some way, from being perceived as crazy or insane, or cast out completely due to the unconventionality of their beliefs and practices. Much as Malesh discussed the impact of transition to a vegetarian foodway on social identity, the responses of the participants point to the ways in which they, in part, must accommodate or conform their narratives to what they either perceive or experience as reactions in their social circles.

Vegetarianism and “Irreligion”

Salma, Wael, and Karim all remark on the association of vegetarianism with atheism. To be clear, these perspectives may stem from the religious positions of the individuals themselves: Salma decided to “quit all religions” and embark on her own spiritual path; Karim, as noted, is atheist; and Wael states that he is “not only Muslim,” but “all religions” and finds value and truth in other traditions. Such associations, both inferred and experienced, may be in part a projection of the participants’ own systems of belief, or the result of an increased alertness to the connections drawn by others between atheism and vegetarianism.

The phenomenon is strong, enough, however, to have compelled Wael to write a 1,000 page book on being Muslim and vegan. In part constructed of articles he published online, he was launching the book, self-published (“no publisher would ever publish this book,”) at the Cairo Book Festival one week after our interview. The book, he says, is

dedicated to “vegans and vegetarians who are now agnostics or atheist because they don’t love religion anymore because it allows to eat meat...A lot of my vegan and vegetarian friends now are not religious. Most of them...it was a phenomena to me, why not be religious and also vegan?” He contends that many abandon their beliefs because they cannot reconcile or “feel harmony” with being vegan and Muslim or Christian. He adds that this is not just occurring in Egypt, but “around the world also...most groups of vegans are atheist/agnostics.” Approaching the Qur’an linguistically, he undertook analysis of all verses pertaining to meat and animals, cross-comparing various translations, and re-interpreting the Qur’an from a “green perspective,” although he qualifies that this is “*an* understanding, not *the* understanding.” Looking at critical verses in support of meat-eating and slaughter, such as the story of Ibrahim and the near-sacrifice of his son Ismael, which is commemorated in the ‘Eid festival, Wael offers an alternative translation of certain words, arguing that, “linguistically, it is not about killing.”

There are no statistics available in Egypt as to the number of atheists or agnostics. Although there are a growing number of voices on social media (there is an “Egyptian Atheist Community” Facebook page with over 1,800 followers) there is still a public stigma attached to such a declaration. Officially, there is a blasphemy law which stipulates six months to five years in prison, and as of January 2018 there is a draft law awaiting passing which criminalizes atheism specifically (Sakr). It is therefore near impossible to quantify the number of atheist or agnostic vegan/vegetarians with any accuracy, nor the extent to which there is societal association of the two. For my own part, several of the respondents to my requests for interviews I initially refused; at the

outset I was trying to limit potential subjects only to those who identified as Muslim. After several correspondences, however, I realized this was very much relevant to the research, and re-established contact for interviews.

While delving deeper into the exact connection between turning from Islam and a vegetarian foodway proved beyond the scope of this study's parameters, I can make a broad generalization that those who reject Islam do so as a result of more extensive philosophical questioning and spiritual search first; as Haytham puts it, himself an agnostic, animal rights "is not the pivotal ground in which everything starts being put into question" but rather is the result of re-evaluation of moral and ethical values as culturally and traditionally understood. This proved to be the case across those who considered themselves only nominally Muslim, in that vegetarianism coincided with a spiritual searching and emerged as a means to enact certain moral beliefs about the treatment and slaughter of animals. There is a disconnect between how animals are utilized according to traditionally-interpreted Islamic principles, and how participants come to view animals used as meat in a modern context.

It is for the present unclear from where the association of a vegetarian foodway and atheism developed. While vegetarianism is indeed largely a Western phenomenon, many of the participants said, generalizing from their own interactions, that many Egyptians don't know "what" vegetarianism is, or simply don't understand it. I suggest that based on the reactions, it is rather symptomatic of the fact that meat-eating *is* considered an Islamic activity. Islamic ties to sacrifice and ritual celebration, and the Qur'anic verses on the divinely-ordained use of animals, are common knowledge. To deny this is in some sense anathema to *being* Muslim as popularly understood.

Abstention from meat can be construed not as a simple dietary choice, but explicitly anti-Islamic.

I submit that this particular phenomenon, if it can be so classified, reinforces the societal trope of meat-eating and Islamic identity, and, consequentially, of vegetarianism as counter to being Muslim. At the time of our interviews none of the participants had discussed their spiritual views openly, apart from trusted friends.⁸ Ali used the term “coming out” as agnostic, which he said he would most likely never do within his own family. Salma says her family would never accept her having “quit” Islam for her spiritual beliefs which, as she describes them, would be classified as agnostic. Haytham says he is not “100% Muslim,” and chooses not to openly share his beliefs to avoid conflict. This is a critical finding, for it suggests the importance of maintaining an outward semblance of Islamic identity in addressing a food practice like vegetarianism.

Public Discussion of Vegetarianism and Islam

Tangential to the connection of irreligion and vegetarianism is the sensitivity to and even tension intimated at by participants in discussion of views outside of traditional Islam. Haytham steers clear of religious arguments to avoid being “judged” or “bullied;” Karim also uses the word “bullied” in describing his family’s treatment of his being vegetarian. Others point to the risk or “danger” of addressing religion. Sally says she avoids religious arguments on the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” Facebook page because “it could get ugly. Because if you offend Islam you’re offending everything

⁸ Two weeks after our interview, Karim appeared on an Egyptian talk show to declare and discuss his atheism with the TV host and a cleric from Al-Azhar University (one of the foremost centers of Islamic learning in the world.). Karim was quickly told to leave the studio, with the host saying “We cannot promote such destructive ideas...you set a very bad example for the Egyptian youth .” The sheikh told Karim he was mentally ill and needed psychiatric help. The clip went viral, and was picked up by international news outlets.

about them and they're whole family, and now they're gonna kill you.” In describing his approach to explaining his diet, Wael clarifies that with strangers he uses “gradual persuasion” in talking about vegetarianism and Islam “because maybe he has a knife and can kill me in a second.” While both of these comments were made somewhat jokingly, the consequences of insulting Islam can be a real risk. One story that emerged early on in my interviews, and was recognized by others when mentioned, is of the Egyptian author and poet Fatima Naoot who, in 2016, was charged with contempt of Islam and sentenced to three years in prison after writing a Facebook post condemning the mass slaughter of animals conducted annually in the Muslim world for the ‘Eid holiday: “‘Millions of innocent creatures will be driven to the most horrible massacre committed by humans for ten-and-a-half centuries,’ she said. ‘A massacre which is repeated every year because of the nightmare of a righteous man about his good son.’” (qtd. in Mourad). Wael, who dedicates his book to her, commented:

the same day she wrote this tweet, some Egyptians brought more sheep to kill, in the street. And they took pictures and sent them to her. They are religious, do not criticize, you will lose. They can kill you, or they can just make you angry by refusing what you are saying and make the opposite. And she just apologized later.

He explains that she invited such backlash for insulting the prophet Ibrahim: “he’s not a man; he’s a precious man. You must not say ‘a man who dreamt a long time ago.’”

The example of Fatma Naoot is an extreme one, given that she was a public figure and that her sentencing may have been intended as warning or deterrent on the part of the state. To be clear, while public condemnation of Islam is a criminal offense, I in no way mean to give the impression that daily conversations among people are in some sense monitored or comparably risky. Because of the potential repercussions, few go about pronouncing such beliefs, however that does not necessarily stop open discussions; even

on Facebook many individuals openly profess their beliefs without consequence. Rather, what I wish to emphasize is that public semblance of Islam can be an issue, and the open practice of vegetarianism can function to challenge one's Islamic identity. Such an environment may have an impact on how individuals structure their vegetarian reasoning and narratives with others.

Vegetarianism and "Conformity"

A final aspect of social interactions which may impact individuals' presentation and perception of their foodway is how participants feel they are perceived by others. There is a sense of marginalization, that other Egyptians "just don't understand." Several participants mentioned feeling they are perceived as--or outright called--"crazy," "insane," "freaky," "stupid," or "abnormal;" that vegetarianism is "a disease," or that they are "given the label of an alien." Haytham phrases it thusly: "any eccentricity gets seen as an abomination." Rasha explains that she was always "different" and went her own way, but that the difficulty in being vegan is that "no one wants to feel excluded, no one wants to feel like they're left out" and looking back, she doesn't know how she managed to stay committed the first few months. Amira says it is not the lifestyle, but "society that makes it difficult for you." Karim says "everyone was against me." Menna explains that she engages with discussions based in Islam because "it's something that really means a lot to me, and I wouldn't let them walk all over my beliefs," but adds that "because a lot of the cultural identity in Egypt is centered around religion," one may be "cast out" for saying "something that makes you sound not religious."

Thus there exists considerable social pressure to maintain a meat-eating norm. Apart from the pragmatic difficulties of eating out socially, participating in family meals,

and finding and/or affording vegetarian or vegan foods, there is the added pressure of constructing a narrative that appeals to and answers the questions, criticisms, or simple discussion of one's foodway. Islam here can operate as a legitimizing mechanism for justifying an otherwise aberrant practice.

Implications of Discourse

A particular tension exists in being Muslim vegetarian in Egypt, where religious argument is compelled on the one hand, but could be potentially antagonistic on the other. The participants in this study demonstrate the range with which this topic may be negotiated, with some focusing on health aspects, others avoiding debate altogether, but most addressing Islamic justifications for their foodway. This discussion offers several insights to the study of Islam as lived religion, and vegetarianism in the context of Islam.

This section's analysis as framed by the lived religion approach can contribute to the broader religious study of Islam in indicating the complex and multi-dimensional nature of individual belief. As some scholars note, Muslim-majority societies are typically regarded as "more traditionalistic and religious than the West," and individual religion taken as a given rather than a choice (Berghammer and Fliegenschnee 92). Because Muslim perception of meat, or not eating meat, straddles and encompasses the individual and the larger culture, text and context, and personal belief and official doctrine, the study of vegetarianism and Islam sheds light on the spectrum of individual belief and religiosity. Moreover, the attention on Islam in the literature as "performed," typically within formalized Islamic institutions or doctrinally-prescribed practice, can reify Islam as the primary identity for Muslims. Examination of Muslim practice of a vegetarian foodway offers an alternative angle, from the standpoint of a decidedly non-

religious practice, with which to consider how individual Muslims grapple with, adapt, abandon, and embrace their belief systems in the midst of an Islamicate culture.

Secondly, the link between Islamic practice and meat consumption has been made in studies centered on Muslim immigrant communities, often concluding that the consumption of halal meat helps to create and maintain boundaries, and demonstrate Islamic identity, in a larger non-Islamic setting, and operates as a mechanism to remain situated within the global *umma* of Islam amidst Western secular culture. Although the symbolic importance of eating halal meat may be amplified in minority settings, the above discourse indicates that meat-eating is in some sense indivisible from traditionally-defined Islamic practice in even Muslim-majority contexts. For one, given the diversity of Muslim cultures and communities, the study of meat-eating can serve as a baseline for examining other correlative aspects of Islam and Islamic practice across diverse communities, not only with regard to religious identity and personal belief, but as a synergistic site of Islam's interaction with global secularism, ethics, and food production. This may then indicate parallels across diverse Muslim enclaves, both minority and not, of the ways in which both Islamic identity and interpretation of Islam are influenced by, reconciled, or in conflict with larger forces related to issues of geopolitics, food justice, global environmental relations, and ethical concerns beyond ideological boundaries. Additionally, this section underlines the ways in which, much as Mukherjee's claims regarding halal meat, meat-eating generally emerges as a fundamental ethos of personal and social identity for Muslims.

Finally, as Ali and Foltz note, motivations for vegetarianism among Muslims often are a result of contemporary ideas about animals, food, and the environment, which

are then retroactively justified in foundational texts. On this point, I would concur; there was no case where Islam was the impetus for a vegetarian foodway, yet all participants were able to offer arguments based in Islam for vegetarianism. For those respondents who are devoted, practicing Muslims, their own turn to vegetarianism necessitated a deep-dive into their religion. Esraa, Amira, Iman, Rasha, and Sally, while having varying starting points, all examined the Qur'an and hadith to ensure that such a practice was in line with Islamic principles. As will be explored in the coming chapter, many came to the conclusion that meat as conventionally produced is fundamentally *un-Islamic*. As practicing Muslims, the search for such justifications makes sense. I would add, however, that the context of Egypt magnifies the need to find Islamic support for one's foodway, if not for one's personal beliefs, then to offer in social interactions.

Diverging from the scholarship, I would argue that giving priority to Islamic arguments does not necessarily point to the privileging of Islamic identity. Rather, it can be a reaction to the mainstream association of meat-eating with Islamic practice, and abstention from meat as potentially anathema to being Muslim. For nominal Muslims, construction of Islamic arguments may have been ancillary to their own spiritual beliefs, but were necessary for relational discourses. Menna, for example, says that she feels "culturally Muslim," although spiritually she harbors doubt, and identifies more as vegetarian than Muslim. Yet, as she cogently states, identity "is not just how you define yourself, but also how others define you." She therefore actively engages in Islamic arguments in support of a vegetarian lifestyle. Wael identifies as Muslim but is open to and engages with other traditions, and regards Islam as "a behavior, not a religion." He considers Islam a pragmatic tool with which to promote veganism, and hopes that by

using Islamic arguments, he may offer a compromise for those who think religion is incompatible with the ethics surrounding meat-eating: “I’m trying to let vegans be friends with their religion. Because when they are religious again in my point of view veganism will spread faster. And we’ll change the stereotype of being vegan and atheist. My focus is animals. So I’m trying to do what can be done to stop [meat-eating].”

One cannot then draw the direct conclusion that those who argue for vegetarianism on Islamic grounds are privileging, as Ali, Foltz, and others claim, Islamic identity, or that Islamic ethics are superior to other systems. Instead, Islam may be utilized as a tool with which to convince believers of the licitness of abstaining from meat and/or animal products in light of Islamic dietary principles. Islamic discourse about vegetarianism also, as above, functions to affirm Islamic identity in the midst of pressure to conform, but is not necessarily indicative of personal conception of identity or system of belief.

Nor can we assume from Islamic, or even health, discourse around vegetarianism that animal welfare is not a factor. As noted, and will be discussed in the coming chapter, animal rights emerged as the one common denominator across all participants as a motivating factor for maintaining a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, yet as a point of argument it was only used by a few respondents, and even then only if the other party was amenable, and only after explaining other reasons. As Ali and Foltz observe, consideration of animal welfare generally falls well outside of the mainstream and, particularly given Qur’anic permission of meat consumption and the hierarchy of Creation as outlined in the concept of *khalifa*, is not a very convincing argument against conventional interpretation of Islam. Attention to Islamic justifications, then, may serve

as a further indication of the use of Islam as an equalizing and socially-sanctioned “tool” by some that allows the promotion of a vegetarian foodway on an individual level, or even advancement of a vegan agenda altogether, for larger ethical reasons.

In sum, the discourse on food in an Islamicate society like Egypt is constructed of shared meanings, traditions, practices, and behaviors informed by Islam. Islam, like food and eating, is at once private and public. An examination of vegetarianism from the framework of lived religion sheds light at the micro-level of personal belief, and reveals the spectrum of belief systems among those who are outwardly, nominally Muslim. This complicates and adds dimension to the conceptualization of Islam as manifested in institutional settings or prescribed practices. It also points to the importance of maintaining the identity of Islam at the macro-level and the negotiation that takes place at the level of the individual. For those who choose to engage in social interactions with the religious implications of a vegetarian foodway, there exists sometimes a careful or purposeful navigation of the discussion, including evaluation of whom they are conversing with, and consideration as to how and what arguments are presented. The conversations explored in this section intimate at the ways in which the Islamicate context of Egyptian culture informs food consumption and contours daily lived practice.

Chapter VI.

Negotiation and Interpretation: Islam and Vegetarianism in Practice

The previous section analyzed how vegetarian Muslims in Egypt structure their narratives in social interactions to address the questions, criticism, and concerns often brought up by others. The discussions demonstrated the ways in which the particular Islamicate culture of Egypt necessitates engagement with Islam at the macro-level for the majority of vegetarians, regardless of private belief. In the following section, I will look more deeply into how respondents interpret and negotiate their food practices through their conception of halal, and their participation in and perception of the annual ritual slaughter during ‘Eid.

Recalling the lived religion framework, halal and ‘Eid represent the lived reality of what people *do* with their belief systems as embedded in the context of global discourse and various Islamic and extra-Islamic influences which impel a vegetarian foodway. Halal, specifically Islamic rules as relates to meat production, functions as the terrain where religious codes merge with personal belief systems and are enacted through food choice. Interpretations of halal point to the global context inhabited by the participants, and call attention to larger and more universal ethical dimensions of animal agriculture. The analysis of ‘Eid concentrates and narrows the broader discussion of halal into one specific site of praxis, revealing how individuals practice and manifest their foodways and corresponding spiritual beliefs in the context of a social and religious event. The ‘Eid festival serves as a point of convergence, a merging, and in some cases a

clashing, of an individual's food practice with culinary tradition, and of personal spiritual beliefs with mainstream religious ritual, all encapsulated in a fundamentally social, meat-centered celebration.

These two foci relate to the third angle of the literature review in that the responses of the majority of participants demonstrate an interpretation of Qur'anic dietary laws in light of present and global circumstances, and indicate the inclusive notion of ethics called for by scholars. This section primarily focuses on the fourth research question, namely, how do Muslim vegetarians negotiate the ethics and morality of religiously-sanctioned meat consumption and sacrifice in Islamic tradition within their own spiritual frameworks?

Halal

The majority of participants cited the failure of directives for halal meat being met as an argument for vegetarianism. Overwhelmingly, they decried the current practices and treatment of animals in factory farming. Censure ranged from the pain and suffering of the animals themselves, the use of antibiotics and an "unnatural" diet and conditions and environmental effects, as well as broader ethical issues tied to the meat industry. Connections were made between such factors rendering the meat not halal, and particular attention was shown to the inadequacy, and sometimes incompetence in execution, of "halal" slaughter itself.

"They are not raised in the right way"

The treatment of animals, how they are raised and the conditions around slaughter, emerged as the key motivating force for all participants in their foodways.

Answers were typically relating to questions regarding initial motivations for becoming vegetarian, or in explaining the connection between religion or spiritual beliefs and food. Several respondents mentioned quite gruesome instances of animal abuse they had seen first- or second-hand, citing documentaries, film clips, or stories read on the internet; such emotive images remain strong motivations for abstention from meat. Although some initially framed it in terms of Islamic dietary laws, and others more generally in the interest of animal welfare and/or environment, the majority read back into the Qur'an and offered Islamic arguments which countered modern practices. Rasha echoes that leanings of many respondents when she says "I am not against halal slaughter; I am against animal cruelty. And I think today the industrial farming which is completely disgusting--I did not want to be a part of that anymore." For many, the cruelty with which factory-farmed animals are raised and killed trumped any injunction for or defense of meat-eating.

Zein: I'm not agreeing with using the [animals], but if you use them it shouldn't be done this way, it's horrible. They put them in small places, they [don't] feed them their foods, not organic foods; and they overbreed which is super-bad, like imagine yourself an animal and you're getting raped, actually.

Iman: How they breed them it's so unnatural. How they milk them 24 hours, how the mom doesn't get to see the baby, they're taken away; how they're emasculated--I don't know, it's a lot of animal abuse.

Esraa: And of course the animal itself is not raised in the right way. They're raised in very tight places where they can't move; this is not their natural habitat. So they can never be healthy, to eat or whatever... What's happening today is completely unapproved by our religion. The way animals are raised in the first place, and the amount of drugs and hormones and toxins they get into their bodies... I saw a video of someone beating them up, like throwing chickens at the wall, so this is what is torture. I believe what people do with them during their life this is what's torturing them all along and the way of killing them. Some by shocking, or spray some gases...this is torture that we are told not to do. The right way to treat animals is to raise them well, and if you are to eat them, there's a certain way, and what I believe is it's not any more painful than dying a natural death.

Like Esraa, others also mentioned that the use of animals is “no longer natural.” Many similarly touch on the use of antibiotics and hormones in meat production, both as a health concern, an environmental issue, and a factor which renders food no longer *tayyib*. Ali summarizes: “things have gotten so bad that they can’t even use the manure of the animals because it’s become so toxic with medications, that you can’t even use that in agriculture.” He says the “natural cycle” of the symbiotic relationship between humans, animals, and the land has been broken off, much to the detriment of the environment itself, the food we consume, and the animals.

Scale emerged as a corresponding factor for all concerned, in that the sheer numbers of animals needed to meet market demand contravened any attempt at humane treatment or larger ethical concerns. As mentioned in the previous section, respondents draw comparisons between present practices and the historical past. Wael, who compared the meat needed in seventh-century Arabia with the “billions” of animals required now, cites several environmental organizations, like the Sierra Club, which claim that the “meat industry is one of the most that pollutes the earth.” Iman similarly argues we are meant to eat meat once or twice a month, as was done in the past. Using an analogy from the Qur’an, she emphasizes the notion of sacrifice: “when God decided to give Ibrahim a celebration, he gave him a *harouf*, a sheep, as a sacrifice. It’s a big thing killing a sheep or a cow to feed, it’s a celebration. It shouldn’t be every day.” Rasha mentions Islamic dictates around dairy, that a cow’s milk should only be taken when it has extra milk to offer after feeding her calf, referencing a story of the Prophet Muhammad. She adds “if we were to follow the Islamic halal slaughter, we wouldn’t be able to eat animals every single day just because of the regulations that surround halal slaughter. It would be way

more expensive to get your hands on an animal; it would be way more hard to get meat anyway. And especially milk.”

Halal Slaughter

Several participants speak to the conditions of slaughtering, and raise points from the Qur’an about the technical requirements that are not met in contemporary slaughter, including that no animal should witness the slaughter of another, nor should animals be pregnant, too old, too young, or injured at the time of death. Many offer reproach that these conditions are rarely if ever met:

Esraa: When they perform the slaughtering they have to say the name of God, of course;...they have to rest the animal before, not let them see each other--which I never saw someone who does that. They let animals see each other being slaughtered, which is not valid; we are told not to do this.

Sally: We’re not supposed to kill animals in front of each other. We’re not supposed to kill them too young, too old, there’s a whole list of things for *zabiha*, for slaughter, for the acceptable slaughter. None of these things are followed. Literally none...They’re slaughtered in front of each other; they’re slaughtered with blood everywhere. And they’re not slaughtered with the knife, like one quick cut--no. They’re killed by all sorts of methods nowadays. It’s not clean.

Shaimaa, who opens her interview by saying that her vegetarianism began with a love of animals, and a questioning the traditional rituals formed around them, mentions a common scene during ‘Eid, where animals are often herded in parking lots or open spaces in Cairo, and then “slaughtered in front of all the other animals,” contrary to Qur’anic instructions. Amira extends the injunction: “Islam clearly says this should not be done. No animal should witness the slaughtering of another. Which means that animals can feel. Which means that animals can see. Which means that animals are

intelligent enough to know that this death that is happening to a family member or a friend is going to happen to them.”

Amira, Sally, and Esraa also mention that Islam specifies a certain age for slaughter. Amira extrapolates the law to the extermination of newborn male chicks in the egg industry, similarly citing that “this is no way halal.”

Zein adds that “halal slaughtering...is not a simple thing of just killing the animal. The animal [has to be facing] the *qiblah* which is the same direction as praying and talking to God”

Congruent with the previous chapter’s observation among many participants that meat-eating itself is not haram, some respondents affirmed that they are not against halal slaughter, and believed that the swift, deep cut, if done as instructed with a sharp knife is a humane and acceptable method of killing. Esraa explicates that halal slaughter is “like normal death, if they do it right.” She adds “I don’t see anything, torturing about it. It’s a sharp knife, they die within three seconds or less.” Zein also says that the one sharp cut is meant to be done in the “most merciful way.”

Concerns were expressed, however, that even in Egypt, where halal slaughter is the only acceptable method, that the technique itself and other regulations are not followed. Doubts were raised about the skill of the butcher, lack of transparency in factory farming in the country, as well as witnessed scenes of slaughter in Cairo. Esraa states that even if a product is certified “halal,” you can never be sure; “they do it the way they want and not the way God wants, the way Allah has told them. This is what I don’t like about it. If you want to guarantee that it’s done the right way you have to do it yourself.” Other respondents, like Rasha and Amira, similarly clarified that the meat

could be acceptable if one could visit a farm and see conditions and the animal being killed, or even do it themselves.

Rasha, referencing in particular the mass slaughter during Eid, says “there is no way anything we practice in Egypt is halal. Like especially around ‘Eid and what we see in the streets and all of that, there is no way that it’s halal.”

Wael references *Earthlings*, a documentary he often uses to convince people to go vegan. He says that people doubt such conditions as shown in the film happen in Egypt, that “this is just in America.” He counters that in Egypt it is worse, that there are no regulations, nor is the law “respected.” Zein, in becoming more aware of animal rights, says that industrial meat production is “so bad” in many countries, “especially in Egypt.”

Amira: “I think in most parts of the world, even if its certified halal it is not halal. So even if a person does not feel for the animal but you are a true believer in Islam, you should be careful what kind of meat you’re eating.” She reports that according to the Qur’an, the animal should “be at peace” at the time of slaughter, but this is rarely the case. “That’s what convinced me; maybe Qur’an wants you to do it, but it doesn’t want you to do it this way.” She remarks that during ‘Eid “everyone becomes a butcher,” yet most people don’t know how to slaughter an animal. “You shouldn’t get your animal slaughtered by somebody who doesn’t know how to slaughter, and...you should not eat that animal. For example, I wouldn’t know how to give an injection to somebody, because I’ve never done it before. [But] for them, it’s just something inferior, so cut it anyway.”

The majority of participants voiced their acceptance of halal slaughter as doctrine and as a concept, but expressed doubt that given the process, scale, and production output

of factory farming, halal regulations could ever be properly implemented. Wael explains “if you are traditional Muslim, you must kill each sheep alone. It’s not practical now; you must kill hundreds in a second as a supply for meat consumption.” As Amira phrases it, she put on a “halal lens” to look at her vegan and vegetarian lifestyle, “and the way it is done, the assembly production it *cannot* be halal.”

Other Ethical Considerations

Several participants pointed to larger ethical issues in the meat industry itself, and that many of the practices which make it un-Islamic are tied to the fact that it is a for-profit business. Menna references studies which examine the levels of PTSD among slaughterhouse workers, and says, in looking at meat, she “doesn’t just see the dead animal,” but “the whole process.” Iman conceives of the chicken and meat industry as “a bigger business than drugs and weapons,” and that it is run “as a machine.” Shaimaa speaks to the ways “human beings abuse power” and the steps which are taken by the food industry with animals and even plants to make them “look bigger or better,” things which are bad for the environment and can “make us sick...all for the sake of mass production and profit.” Esraa also refers to how animals are “manipulated” through human intervention for higher production value. She argues that the way animals are used for meat is “different than what people think” because “everything is turned into business. And when this happens, they only care about the money. They don’t even care about the people who are working this stuff, so they don’t care about the animals. They will do anything just to have more money.”

Meat Abstention *as* Islamic

Many participants expressed not only their conviction that they were doing the right thing according to Islam, but frustration that others did not “see” the consequences of their dietary choices. Amira and Menna both reference the Paul McCartney quote, “If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian,” and several respondents allude to the fact that people are largely ignorant of where meat comes from. Menna says “I feel like people eat animals out of custom and tradition and not out of actively wanting to be violent. I don’t think violence is part of our nature, if we can say that humans have a nature...If people had to do the slaughtering themselves every time they have to eat, I don’t think they would eat that much...I don’t think we’re hardwired to kill animals.”

Rasha, who undertook her own deep-study of Islam in her transition to a vegan diet, emerged reassured that veganism was not opposed to Islam, and that in fact, in practicing such a foodway she was following her religion more now than before. Meat, she says, “can’t be as accessible to us as it is now, to be practiced right.” To skeptics, if they agree, she shows videos of a factory farm, and asks if they think it is halal: “People don’t know what’s going on, that’s why they think its ok. They just hear its ok to eat meat, so I’m not doing anything wrong. Technically, eating meat is a very small factor of the whole process of getting meat. People don’t look into it enough at all.”

Sally states that Muslims need “re-education in the *sunnah* diet” and references hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, who was “compassionate to all people, to all creatures. [He] would never purposely kill an animal; he purposely saved animals, went out of his way to teach others not to disturb animals.” She adds that she doesn’t understand how people miss the connection between meat production and Islamic directives about how

animals should be treated: “For me it’s just funny, how they don’t see this. They tell me they’re religious, or they care about Islam. They care more about pork...By eating this crap, it’s as if they’re eating pork. It might as well be forbidden. Because there’s no one doing it the right way.” Esraa makes a similar connection between improperly raised and slaughtered animals and eating pork “They are just like pork. It’s the same thing. Unless you do...[Islamic] specifications, you shouldn’t eat. And that’s why what I am doing is more aligned with what I believe than what other people who are eating meat do. Because I think that the conditions that should be present are not there.”

Amira offered particularly impassioned arguments drawn from Islam:

You know there’s a camp, and all the animals are herded, and one by one they are taken. Are you telling me that they cannot see the other animals? Are you really taking that much care? Are you actually blocking their view? No you’re not. And really pious, believing Muslims won’t care. And this is what annoys me. You know you’re religion, you are educated. What part of it do you not see?

The method of slaughter and the treatment of animals garnered passionate and informed arguments from all participants. While most, apart from one, were accepting of meat-eating generally, with some clarifying that one must guard against declaring meat haram, all expressed an abhorrence to the conditions of factory farming, citing specific processes, witnessed scenes or stories heard, YouTube clips of the dairy and meat industries, and mainstream documentaries. While a few maintain strong health reasons for their food choices, animal suffering emerged as the one common denominator for all participants. Many extrapolated Islamic arguments well beyond halal slaughter, not only to animal welfare, but to the dairy and egg industries as well as the environment and larger food system.

‘Eid

As described in the introduction, the Feast of the Sacrifice, *‘Eid al-Adha*, commemorates the story of Ibrahim’s devotion to God through his willing sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Domestic animals are purchased for slaughter by those who can afford it, and the meat is divided into thirds and distributed between family, friends, and the poor. In Cairo, the ‘Eid slaughter is a public one which typically takes place throughout the streets of Cairo. Animals are herded around butcher shops and spaces throughout the city, and ritually slaughtered en masse. The spectacle can be problematic for vegetarians, for it is nearly impossible to avoid scenes of the slaughter.

Of the fifteen participants, just three expressed a general acceptance of the slaughter carried out in Cairo during the ‘Eid feast, but with some reservations.

Iman, who was the most enthusiastic about the feast, said it is her favorite day of the year, explaining that it’s more about the family than the food. She doesn’t get bothered by the sacrifice, “because I know all this meat is going to the unfortunate who don’t get to eat meat. They don’t really understand the concept of you shouldn’t eat meat. It’s not time to preach; it’s not a time to be all sensitive.”

Both Rasha and Esraa say their families are used them not eating meat at the feast, and because they’ve grown up with the ritual of sacrifice, it doesn’t bother them. They both add, however, that they object to the way the slaughters are carried out. Rasha clarifies: “If it was done right, it would be completely fine. But the way it’s done in Egypt, like I hate watching the animals tied up on the street all the time--it must be so traumatizing to them to see all the bustling cars and people all around them 24/7 and

being sold and pulled from their ears, and on the backs of trucks--it's too much for the animals.”

The remainder of participants makes an effort to leave the city or the country altogether, or avoid leaving the house during ‘Eid:

Ali: I try not to be in Cairo. Cairo becomes a bloodbath. And it's very heartbreaking. Not only the sight of animals, the sight of slaughter, it's also how kids treat the animals while they're alive. It's very heartbreaking...Even staying at home is not an option, I've tried that. During ‘Eid you get to hear the animals; people keep the animals in their houses. It's all around you, you can't hide from it...This and the stench of dead meat on the street and the blood and the carcasses and the skin. I haven't been in a big city during ‘Eid for the past 7-8 years.

Menna: I try my hardest not to be in Cairo during that time, because I can't bear it. Some people do the slaughter in my building, and then the whole building smells like death for weeks after. And I hate it.

Karim: I avoid going out. A lot of blood and slaughtering; it's tough. Too much pain. It's not pretty, at all...the streets covered in blood. It's crowded; it's not pretty; it's ugly, killing animals in the streets. It's just terrible.

Shaimaa: I hate going to the street that day. There's blood everywhere and it just shows how inhumane the entire day was...it's horrible...you can't have like 5-6 large cows or bulls in very small trucks all tied together on a highway for an hour. You can't do that. They look so scared and traumatized. It's a horrible time; it's a horrible time.

Other participants offer comparable statements. Aya says “it's torture,” hearing or seeing the slaughter, and that she “can't handle it” and promised herself she would not be around Cairo during that time. Wael visits “any country that does not have this ritual” for he cannot “tolerate” it. Mahmoud says he avoided it even as a meat eater: “I think the blood, the looks of the butchers.” Haytham also comments that he hated the day “even before being a vegetarian.” Amira tried to look away from the animals being sold in the marketplace, and now avoids going out altogether. Salma, who lives in a busy downtown neighborhood, finds it difficult to ignore: “you can see the blood everywhere. I don't like

these days, I don't really like them. And I feel like I want to save all of these animals. What do you do?"

Alternatives to Slaughter

Many participants expressed that slaughter during 'Eid is not mandatory, but is *sunnah*, a recommended or encouraged practice. Sally remarks that many customs were absorbed from "pre-Islamic pagan tribal traditions" and uses the historical context of the Qur'an as a frame of reference, arguing that the 'Eid sacrifice was meant to be done at the completion of the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca: "in that chapter it tells you that on a certain day, in a certain way, these specific groups of animals will be offered as a sacrifice--while you're there, in Mecca, on that day." But, she continues, the majority of Muslims apply the passage much more broadly, regardless of whether they are on *hajj* or not. Mahmoud, Zein, Esraa, Menna, and others also note that actual slaughter is not a requirement or pillar of Islam, and is a cultural practice.

The value, however, in offering meat to those less able to afford it was recognized, and some suggested alternatives to fulfill the charitable aspect of 'Eid. Esraa explains "the main purpose of the day is worship," but admits "people love to eat," and jump at opportunities to celebrate. One doesn't have to eat the meat, or even sacrifice, for worship, but can give meat away to the poor. Rasha, like Esraa, recognizes the poverty of a large segment of the population, and that lot of Egyptians "can't even get food on their plate, let alone try to understand that animals are not commodities." She suggests giving out money, or helping out a family, also equally counts as *sunnah*. Several respondents give donations to organizations which undertake the slaughter and deliver the meat to

those in need. As Mahmoud says, “it was not necessary to physically slaughter a sheep, but it was to give something.”

In contrast, one participant could not condone even the giving of meat to the poor, describing it as “sadism,” and the killing of animals as “a crime rather than charity work.”

Zein, Menna, and Wael suggest offering alternative foods to the poor during ‘Eid. Zein emphasizes the “social connection” that underpins charitable giving during ‘Eid, and acknowledges that there are those who eat meat seldom if at all, but suggests that other meals, even vegan ones, could be offered, and appreciated, by those who have never had them. Menna also affirms that the point is to give to “less privileged individuals,” and says one could give alternatives which “could still lead to the same thing,” i.e. demonstrate a charitable practice. Wael recounts a story of a friend who, the previous ‘Eid, used the money for buying an animal to instead purchase grains and fruits to give to the poor: “he felt happiness, and thanked me a lot. He felt the comparison--with \$300 you can buy maybe 50kg of meat, and with the same amount you can get hundreds of kilograms of grains and beans, so he felt that he fed more people. So feeding more people is better than giving them meat for one meal.” Wael goes on to make the point that feeding the hungry is repeated again and again in the Qur’an, not slaughtering animals.

Effect on Children

A final, and surprising, theme that emerged from the discussion around ‘Eid was its impact on children. For a few respondents, the witnessing of ritual slaughter while young served as a key point of conversion to a vegetarian foodway. But many expressed

concern and even dismay at the effect that the witnessing of slaughter, and the otherwise abusive treatment of animals in the street, could have on children.

As mentioned in his above comment, Haytham expresses distress not only in the killing of the animals, but in how children treat the animals: “I see the vast majority of kids being brought up to treat animals as entertainment objects, and the sheep or the cow that’s going to be slaughtered tomorrow as a soulless creature.” He equates the situation with his own vegetarianism, saying “I don’t kid myself about the good me being a vegetarian makes on the world” but that he likes to think “the world becomes a better place;” similarly, in witnessing children abusing animals, he sometimes “gets the guts” to speak up, but other times thinks it doesn’t make a difference.

Shaimaa attributes some of the violence and bullying among children to watching slaughter. She says it made her “question human logic,” that parents could be averse to allowing their children to play video games or watch certain movies, but permit and even celebrate the participation in animal slaughter.

Amira says she would never allow her children to witness something like this, although boys are often “pushed” to watch “to be tough.”

Karim recounts his own childhood, saying “when I used to see that as a child, I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t feel that it’s bad, I didn’t feel that it’s a mistake.” Now however, he expresses concern that children are allowed to watch something so “inhumane.”

Eid al-Adha thus can be problematic for some Muslims, a cultural and religious tradition commemorating a significant act of sacrifice by a revered holy figure, but the practice of which may be in opposition to personal moral values. The participants

demonstrate the various ways in which they negotiate the feast, and reconfigure traditional interpretation to be in accordance with both Islam and a particular ethics-based worldview. The above discourse represents a synthesis of what is perceived as the “essence” of a religious practice, including both charitable giving as well as compassion for both less fortunate humans *and* animals, rooted in the real-world conditions which impact people and the animals they consume.

Discussion

As discussed in the final section of the literature review, contemporary scholars call for an inclusivist rendering of Islamic ethics. They are critical of the privileging of Islamic identity, the insistence on the superiority of Islamic ethics, and the emphasis placed on traditional dietary laws to the exclusion of other, broader ethical considerations, including environmental issues, sociopolitical and economic concerns, and justice within the food system. They charge that given the global nature of the modern food system, which raises mutually-shared concerns among communities and nations, a “transcultural framework of ethical principles” should be embraced, with particular focus on the production of food, not just consumption (al-Attar 55).

I submit that the particular perspectives of Muslim vegetarians as evidenced in the above discussions demonstrate the alternative interpretations happening on the ground among laypeople which go beyond a doctrinal adherence to Islamic tradition, and encompass the larger ethical issues pointed to by scholars.

Nearly all participants made particular mention of the notion of the halal, and the fact that the way animals are currently treated and slaughtered is not in accordance with Islamic directives. This falls very much in line with the liberal contextual approach

outlined by Dahlan-Taylor, in which process and means of production superseded the technical application of slaughter. As detailed in the previous chapter, many of the reactions among family and friends were exemplary of the adaptive response, referencing the law as laid out in the Qur'an as sufficient permission for meat consumption. Participants in contrast were attentive to the conditions of the animals themselves, with many citing hadith and Qur'anic references, noting the Prophet Muhammad's kindness and compassion to animals, as well as instances of divine punishment for animal abuse. The use of antibiotics and hormones were mentioned as treatments which made meat no longer *tayyib*, causing illness for both the animals and humans who consume them. Doubt was cast upon the efficacy of slaughter itself, as to whether the animal was indeed "fit" for slaughter, the skill and correct application on the part of the butcher, and the fact that each animal is to be killed in isolation from any other.

Such insights both embody the kind of interpretation called for by scholars, as well as offer a counter demonstration to criticisms by voices like Ramadan, who argue that Muslim countries must "reconcile themselves to higher objectives" beyond the norms and technical aspects of Islam. While these individual readings of Islam may not be representative of mainstream Egyptians, and are indeed a far cry from official application of Islamic rules on a national scale, they nevertheless represent significant examples of the acknowledgment of contemporary and fluctuating circumstances and larger injustices in the food system, while still appealing to an Islamic framework.

However, while I agree with the cited scholars that in such an interconnected arena like globalized food production it is important to find a means of engaging with

ethical issues that is inclusive and universal, this study raises the importance of appealing to Islam in the context of a Muslim society, and perhaps even extends to minority communities in other nations. The maintenance of Islamic identity is a critical issue. Even as Ali and Mukherjee emphasize how halal helps inform and construct Islamic identity in minority communities and for the Muslim *umma* globally, identity is equally important in a Muslim majority society like Egypt. Particularly as indicated with the association of vegetarianism with atheism or as anti-Islamic, the grounding of some of the justifications for a vegetarian foodway in Islam is an important component for legitimacy. Additionally, for individual believers, an adherence to and continued practice of faith and tradition is an important factor. If the consumption of meat is popularly construed as a literal demonstration of faith to some degree, then any argument for a vegetarian foodway must address how abstention from meat is aligned with Islamic principles. Moreover, given current methods of production, vegetarianism itself can be argued as a manifestation of Islamic faith. Consequently, if the goal is to bring attention to larger ethical issues in the food system, it is worthwhile to frame them in an Islamic context, particularly for a predominantly Muslim community. This can carry forth to implications with the institution of Islamic laws around halal internationally, as well as with food and health initiatives in Muslim cultures, subjects with which I will engage more in the final chapter.

Implications of Discourse and Potential for Change: the Individual vs. the System

What does it actually mean, or matter, then, that there is evidence of a group of people, in this admittedly small-scale study, who are engaged in a re-interpretation of Islamic dietary laws beyond normative conceptions, in which the “essence” of the laws is

taken to include broader ethical principles? What are the possible effects, if any, on the larger ethical issues alluded to by scholars in meat and dairy production? Dahlan-Taylor, while partial to the inclusivity of the liberal contextual approach, is critical of both it and the adaptive response in that focus is on the individual; individual practice and individual action takes precedence over collaborative effort, and may ignore the larger politics of the food system. Rather, she contends that an Islamic food ethics must shift the focus from the private individual to the larger society. She rejects that there is a meaningful connection between individual consumerism and substantial institutional change in the food system: “While it can be argued that a society where everyone is a vegetarian could be one with less animal suffering and environmental damage, there is a huge gap between the personal act of being a vegetarian and the realization of such society” (“Minority” 62-3). Dahlan-Taylor offers two solutions to the problem as she sees it: to emphasize the role of religious leaders in forging connections for believers between individual piety and collaborative action; and for believers to personally engage with the tradition of ritual animal sacrifice in order to “inspire a more critical approach to other practices of industrial animal farming and the way food is produced in general” (107-9). I counter that the research conducted in this study conflicts with such an analysis, and will address each of her proffered solutions in turn. To be clear, Dahlan-Taylor’s research is largely drawn from Muslim minority communities in the United States. However, given that her criticism rests on the controversy over what constitutes the “essence” of Islamic dietary laws in their application in a transnational context, attached to which are the complexities of the global market and the larger ethical issues of food justice, I regard her analysis as

relevant to this case study in that the ethical questions addressed, although they may have variant cultural contexts, are global in their scope and application.

The Problem of Authority

Firstly, where Dahlan-Taylor finds Muslim religious leaders and scholars as responsible for contextualizing canon in light of issues of ethics and food justice, there are in fact considerable drawbacks to reliance on authoritative voices. As Moosa points out, in many parts of the Muslim world ethical questions land “on the table of governments and state bureaucracies long before they become part of a process of social and ethical debate” and “these issues only arrive at the desks of ethicists, more often than not, for the sole purpose that they require rubber-stamping and legitimating from religious elites who merely endorse policies adopted by their states” (142). Moosa’s observations are particularly relevant for the context of Egypt, in which the government’s Ministry of Religious Endowments oversees the nation’s religious institutions, and employs and directs appointments for religious authorities and scholars.

Moosa furthermore charges that “Muslim ethicists...have yet to configure the theory and practice of Muslim ethics in relation to vastly changed social realities,” and that the “tool kit of knowledge from the canon” is weighed down with “norms, practices, and forms of reasoning that no longer resonate with contemporary experiences of Muslims” (152). This is an important point for, as indicated, mainstream interpretation of ethics as relates to the meat industry typically is subsumed to traditional Qur’anic interpretation in Egyptian culture. All participants engaged in their own research to align their food practice with their spiritual or ethical principles. For believing Muslims, this often was grounded in resources from the internet, including Muslim, secular, and other

religious voices, as well as popular Western discourse about vegetarianism. Some, like Amira, expressed frustration that they had nobody to guide them through their foodways to being Islamically correct. Several participants made reference to Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, an American Islamic scholar who has several YouTube videos and online articles in which he argues that the Prophet Muhammad was semi-vegetarian, and that vegetarianism is very much in accordance with Islam. Wael noted an Israeli author who explained the validity of vegetarianism through Judaic, Christian, and Islamic perspectives.⁹ The majority of participants, however, undertook their own study, and ultimately aligned their practice with Islam through their own insights.

There exists then a disconnect between traditional authoritative voices and the perspectives of some laypeople in a changing modern context. The rulings of traditionalists with regard to modern practices in the food system too often rely on anachronistic normative ethics but without serious consideration of larger questions about “how individuals and communities envisage what they deem to be desirable lifestyles, practices, and truth claims” (Moosa 153). The voices of ordinary Muslims are seldom heard, and ethical decisions are made by interpreters of tradition without input from the community (148). I concur with Moosa, in opposition to Dahlan-Taylor, that it may be detrimental to rely on voices of authority to “frame the issues concerning food in terms of a collective need” (Dahlan-Taylor “Minority” 134). The contributions of lay Muslims, in addition to secular ethical discussions regarding vegetarianism, can serve to address issues for the collective need within an Islamic framework, and those individuals can

⁹ The Israeli author and blogger, Sharbel Balloutine, is notable as the author of what is claimed to be the first book on veganism in Arabic, and is the founder of “The Vegan Human,” an Arab animal rights group. As Wael explains, however, although he managed his own correspondence with the author, the “sharing” or posting of such resources, because of their origination in Israel, is considered a crime in Egypt.

indeed be sources of larger change in their particular societies. While authoritative voices can be supportive, it is prudent to establish resources for Muslims to engage with and guide their own interpretation.

Separation and Sacrifice

As to the second point regarding ritual animal sacrifice, Dahlan-Taylor argues that the post-domesticity of the modern animal farming system, characterized by a “lack of physical and psychological proximities” of humans to animals removes the intimacy required in ritual slaughter, one that is supposed to engender respect and gratitude for where food comes from (“Barbarity” 354). Rather, reprising one’s personal role in the sacrifice cultivates a moral responsibility, and can “serve as a starting point for re-cultivating a spiritual understanding of animals” (364). Furthermore, she is critical of what she terms the “vegetarian response” put forth by Foltz and Masri. Both scholars argue that the essence of the sacrifice of *‘Eid al-Adha* is not the slaughter and offering of the animal, but compassion and charity, and is therefore substitutable with other acts, such as offering money to the poor (359). Dahlan-Taylor considers such a reduction problematic, in that it assumes the “the ritual is reducible to an essential purpose,” and that it affirms, rather than challenges, “the distancing and concealment that makes possible the condition of postdomesticity” (354; 360). Dahlan Taylor instead argues that correction of the separation and distance of post-domesticity can incite a psychological re-orientation that can extend to activism on the part of large-scale ethical issues of the slaughterhouse.

The participants’ responses, however, overturn Dahlan-Taylor’s conclusion. Firstly, and concurrent with Foltz and Masri, according to the majority of participants and

their interpretations, the “essence” of ‘Eid is indeed far bigger than mere sacrifice, and is manifested through charitable giving in forms other than slaughter. None reported participation in the slaughter, but several expressed acceptance of the giving out of meat to the poor, although meat as an offering was ancillary to the larger purpose. Several suggested offering other types of food as well as cash donations. Economic aspects were considered as well, with regard to the high cost of meat verses the amount of other food that could be purchased to feed a family for more than one celebratory meal. And as Sally described with her own family’s eventual adjustment to a pescatarian-vegan ‘Eid, cultural traditions can be maintained, without necessarily including meat.

Secondly, many respondents recounted their own witnessing of slaughter as a traumatic experience. In fact, according to some of my interviewees, witnessing ritual sacrifice--as is common in Egypt--did serve to reconnect the individual with animals, but not in the way Dahlan-Taylor claims. Rather, these incidences were quite often cited as catalysts of conversion *to* a vegetarian lifestyle.

Dahlan-Taylor’s argument is reductionist in that the focus is on the ritual act of slaughter itself, and the consumption of meat, rather than the humans who are responsible for carrying out the process. Although all but two participants described avoiding the slaughter because they couldn’t “handle” it, the majority nevertheless expressed an acceptance of the act of sacrifice, but objected to the means in which it was carried out. This suggest that it is not the witnessing of the ritual itself, as Dahlan-Taylor contends, that might engender an “understanding of animals as spiritual subjects,” but how the animal is treated in the larger process of sacrifice and by the humans who are responsible for the process (361).

Indeed, particularly noted in participant descriptions of ‘Eid sacrifice was the fact that animals were often considered without feelings, as objects for use. Such mainstream conceptions of animals, in spite of the proximity called for by Dahlan-Taylor, proved not to contribute to a “spiritual understanding” of animals among those involved in the slaughter process. In fact, several participants expressed apprehension at the effect on children watching animal slaughter, making connections between animal abuse as well as interactive violence. Thus, proximity does not directly translate to connection, nor does religious ritual necessarily engender spiritual feeling. Rather, participants viewed the slaughter process as particularly *un*-Islamic, and it was this treatment and killing of animals which cultivated a spiritual connection, or *a* connection, not in appreciation of where meat comes from, but in recognition of another being which could feel and see, and deserved a peaceable existence, or at least one without suffering. It is not the witnessing of or participation in the ritual itself that is significant, but the human enactment of divine directives which, when improperly and inhumanely executed, preclude a cultivation of spiritual connection both with the animal and the ritual.

Conclusion

Criticism of Islamic food ethics rests on the supposition that a comprehensive notion of food justice must extend beyond the prioritization of religious identity to encompass the production side of the food system, and that only cooperative relations which are inclusive of secular and universal ethical systems, while being informed by Islamic ethics, can challenge and change the “inequalities, exploitation, and oppression involved in the way food is produced” (Dahlan-Taylor “‘Good’ food” 258). While an inclusive ethical system is no doubt important, this study demonstrates that within

Muslim communities where mainstream interpretation is largely comprised of the adaptive response, the framing of food production issues in an Islamic context is imperative to garner popular support and social acceptance. Given the Egyptian context of the participants, the choice of vegetarianism serves as a challenge to the status quo, and represents an engagement with opposing conceptions about correct and proper ways to eat. While granted it is difficult to make predictions about how individual choice may impact larger scale change, the social and religious nature of meat consumption enlarges the platform on which individuals operate. This, added to the strong social media presence of vegetarians, and Muslim vegetarians, in Egypt and globally, not to mention consumer demand, can have the potential for greater change within the food system. Reliance on voices of authoritative religious figures, while useful, misapprehends the lived reality of many Muslims who engage with ethical issues and make concrete changes as pertains to their foodways in an Islamic framework. The arguments and insights presented by the participants show how Islam can be reinterpreted to acknowledge and address concerns that the alteration of conventional food production and consumption is aligned with Islam, and in some cases, even more “Islamic” than current practices. Furthermore, participants’ reasoning and motivations are not mere gestures of individual piety or personal moral belief, but about larger injustices they see within the food system. Thus both intention and action are ultimately macro and fundamentally inclusive and universal. In this sense, vegetarianism can be a bridge between both secular and Islamic values.

Chapter VII.

Conclusion

This thesis investigated how Egyptian Muslim vegetarians or vegans sustain and explain their alternative foodways in the midst of a meat-positive culture, and navigate and justify abstention from meat within their own religious frameworks. Given the strong association of meat with Islamic faith, including the Qur'anic injunction on humans' use of animals for food, and the divine commandment to partake of all things which God has made lawful as an expression of faith, I posited that being vegetarian or vegan in an Islamicate culture necessitated engagement with Islam, both in the context of social interactions, as well as in a believer's interpretation of Islamic proscriptions around meat. Research was grounded in and shaped by the theoretical framework of lived religion, with a view to analyze a vegetarian or vegan foodway as an element of practice of one's spiritual beliefs, demonstrating how Islam is encountered, adapted, affirmed, or rejected through this dietary practice. In fifteen in-depth interviews with Egyptian vegans and vegetarians, I discussed and analyzed the ways in which participants reconcile their foodways with the Islamicate culture they inhabit, including within their immediate social circles, larger Egyptian society, mainstream interpretation of meat-eating based on traditional Qur'anic interpretation, as well as global discourse on the ethics of meat consumption and industrial livestock production.

Major Findings

In line with this thesis' hypothesis, Muslim vegetarian and vegans, embedded in an Islamic society, are indeed compelled to engage with Islam regardless of personal beliefs. Additionally, and congruent with the scholarship on consumption of halal meat in minority communities as a symbol of communal identity, meat-eating in a majority Muslim culture like Egypt functions as an important praxis of Islamic identity.

However, diverging from the scholarship, this study shows that meat-eating is not simply a means with which to define and delineate identity in contrast to a larger non-Islamic culture, but can be a distinct demonstration of Islamic faith--to be Muslim, as popularly understood in Egypt, is to eat meat, and to not eat meat can be construed as anti-Islamic. In addition to considerable social pressure to conform to a meat-eating norm in daily participation in meals with others, a connection was indicated between vegetarianism and atheism, irreligion, or other religious systems. Such an association is not only a social stigma, but can be a criminally punishable offense. Many scholars offer the critique that the use of Islamic arguments, both with regard to halal meat consumption and, conversely, by vegetarians for meat abstention, points to the tendency to privilege Islamic identity and "religious authenticity" to the exclusion of other more universal ethical issues. Contrarily, this study demonstrates that Islam serves as a legitimizing tool for justifying a foodway that is popularly viewed as oppositional to fundamental dietary laws. Explanations of reasoning for vegetarianism are buttressed by Islamic arguments, not to prioritize Islamic identity, but to conform to societal expectations of Islamic practice, and maintain either one's personal Islamic identity, or, for some, an outward semblance of Islamic identity.

Although rarely featured in the arguments used for vegetarianism in the context of social interactions, animal welfare emerged as the one common motivator among all participants. Primarily, current conditions concerning the breeding, raising, and slaughtering of animals in the factory farming system were deemed by participants as contrary to Islamic directives about how animals should be used and treated. While the majority of Muslims regard the technical application of halal slaughter as sufficient to render meat halal, participants engaged in a contextual reinterpretation of halal directives, concluding that the process of industrial meat production made the meat unfit for consumption in Islamic terms. Traditional interpretation was similarly reconfigured for the 'Eid ritual slaughter, with the charitable "essence" of the feast emphasized over the carrying out of slaughter itself.

In the realm of food ethics, scholars have been critical that the Islamic perspective has privileged Islamic identity and relied on ethics derived from Islamic scriptural texts, rather than appealing to more universal ethical systems, and considering broader ethical implications of food production beyond consumption. While an approach to the global food system that is unifying rather than polarizing is no doubt valuable, this study suggests, given the strong connection between meat-eating and Islamic identity, that within the context of an Islamic community it is imperative to appeal to an Islamic framework. If the goal is to raise awareness and challenge injustices within the food system, then abstention from meat must be shown to be not only *not* contrary to Islam, but in alignment with fundamental Islamic ethical principles. Participant responses represent a reinterpretation of Islamic principles among laypeople, which are informed and shaped by global ethical concerns which transcend ideological boundaries. In this

sense, the discussions featured in this study reveal a subversion of traditional Islamic norms, but which are yet supported and framed by Islamic values.

Implications of Research

Firstly, issues around vegetarianism, and global food production more generally, are relatively overlooked in scholarship pertaining to Islam. This study was supplemented by just a few key texts which engaged with both Islam and vegetarianism, and a further few which addressed ethical concerns of food production (primarily dealing with GMOs) as relates to Islam. However, as evidenced by the findings here, modern food production and its ties to environmental degradation, climate change, animal welfare, and socioeconomic and labor justice can have a profound impact over individual religiosity and traditional religious interpretation. This study contributes to Islamic studies and the field of religion generally, demonstrating that particular non-religious foodways like vegetarianism, and issues tied to food production, serve as important lenses from which to view changing faith on the ground amidst concerns of global import. Additionally, given that no such study to my knowledge has been undertaken in a Muslim majority country, this research offers an alternative viewpoint of contemporary Egyptian Islamic piety and practice.

Secondly, as outlined in chapter 4, the nutritional shift over the last few decades from the traditional Egyptian diet to a Western one is in part a contributor to Egypt's current health crisis, with the highest rates of obesity in the world, as well as comparable rates of chronic disease. This study indicates that the design and implementation of nutritional interventions in Egypt, or in other Muslim communities globally, must then employ appropriate strategies to address religious concerns as pertains to consumption.

Other studies have noted the importance of cultural sensitivity and the role of ethnicity in dietary programs (see Devine et al. 1999). This research highlights and underscores the connection of meat with Islamic culture, practice, and identity. Interventions may therefore benefit from awareness of particular reluctances to change in eating habits; e.g., Sally used the example of the *sunnah* diet, essentially following the largely plant-based diet of the Prophet Mohammed, as a means with which to help her own Egyptian family make the transition away from meat and animal products to more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Moreover, the analysis undertaken here indicates that health is most likely the strongest and widely accepted motivator to encourage dietary change; ethical arguments which address animal welfare or the environment may be rejected on Islamic grounds. Thus, phrases such as “plant-based diet” may be more successful than “vegan” or “vegetarian,” with “diet” and focus on health emphasized over potential (ethical) sources of conflict.

Thirdly, the environmental impact of intensive animal farming has been increasingly documented. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) cites animal agriculture as the largest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions, and a leading cause of the loss of biodiversity. With the growing world population, demand for livestock products is projected to grow by more than 70% by 2050 (Gerber et al. xxii). The Muslim population in particular is ranked as the fastest growing religious group worldwide. Given the strong ties between Islamic identity and the consumption of halal meat, such estimates suggest that Muslim communities and nations may emerge as a key demographic in garnering support both for modification of intensive farming practices as well as moderation in animal product consumption.

Policies to mitigate the impact of the global livestock sector may be more effective as an international endeavor among Muslim nations, or as a national endeavor among Muslim communities, if there is a deliberate and transparent attempt at alignment with Islamic dietary laws. Furthermore, initiatives to generally reduce the consumption of animal products from an environmental standpoint would again be more successful if presented within the halal schema.

Limitations

The scope of this study was limited to self-proclaimed vegan and vegetarian Muslims. Absent was the meat-eating perspective. How meat eaters conceive of the role of meat, if any, in their own Islamic faith and practice, as well as attitudes about those who abstain from meat, would offer an important point of comparison for the issues discussed.

As noted, I recruited participants from two major groups through Facebook, but the majority responded through the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” page (at present count nearly 8,800 members) rather than the “Plant-based Diet (Egypt)” page (over 460,000 members). One reason for this discrepancy in response could be the fact that the majority of posts in the former group are in English, compared with those in the latter which are largely in Arabic. Another reason might be that the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society” page may be comprised of those who have more ethical motivations for their diets, rather than health, which is the primary focus of a plant-based diet. Given that animal welfare emerged as a strong motivation among all participants, it could be the case that such ethical considerations foster more engagement on a religious level rather than those who look to dietary change for health reasons alone. As discussed in chapter 3,

while abstention from meat may be generally accepted by mainstream Muslims for health reasons, ethical motivations makes it more problematic. Thus further research with a broader and more diverse study sample would be required to determine the extent to which vegetarian/vegan Muslims engage with Islam if health reasons are seen to be the primary motivator.

Regarding my own positionality, this study was limited to English speakers recruited through social media, and therefore restricted to those with particular levels of education as well as technological access. Although all participants spoke fluent English, there may have been nuances or subject matter which could have been delved into more deeply by a researcher conversant in Arabic. And while all participants were forthcoming in their religious discussion, the fact that I am not Muslim, and a foreigner, may have had an impact on how participants answered the interview questions. Lastly, being a vegetarian myself, I took care in crafting questions and conducting interviews as objectively as possible, but must acknowledge the potential bias given that it is a topic I have explored in depth for my own personal interest.

Recommendations for Future Research

The association of “irreligion,” atheism, or agnosticism with vegetarianism is an avenue worth further exploration. The number of times this theme came up in both interviews and in the Facebook groups renders it a significant phenomenon, potentially with parallels to scholarship conducted in the West. Hamilton and Zeller, for example, maintain that vegetarianism functions to provide the meaning, identity, and community that is lacking in modern secular society, or is no longer fulfilled by traditional religion. Future work could then investigate both the seemingly popular association of vegetarian

foodways with irreligion, as well as the evolution of personal faith in conjunction with vegetarianism, delving into ethical standpoints, points of influence, and whether or not there is indeed a documentable correlation between giving up meat and/or animal products and a turning from faith. Also, given the difficulty in conducting research on what is quite literally a criminal belief in an Islamic country like Egypt, a vegetarian foodway can serve as an acceptable gateway to what could be considered a controversial topic.

Some sociological scholarship on vegetarianism has presented theorization on meat-eating and gender, most notably Carol Adams' book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990,) as well the work of Kecia Ali discussed in this paper. The connection of meat and masculinity was mentioned by a few participants in this study. One interviewee noted the link between meat with sexual virility, and at least a quarter of participants cited pressure on men to consume meat, as well as to watch the slaughter of animals, to avoid being perceived as weak or a "sissy," a word used by at least three different participants. Given the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society, gathering data on meat consumption and masculinity may offer insight on gender dynamics and masculine norms and identities.

Future endeavors might consider food production, and the ethics of the modern food system, as a means with which to investigate the intersection of Islamic faith and identity with the larger secular and globalized world. Ali, Mukherjee, and Frederickson observe that the consumption of halal meat for Muslim communities can function as a mechanism of circumscription between both belonging and exclusion, delineating identity in the midst of non-Islamic globalized culture. This focus on dietary laws and

consumption, however, is an approach which can serve to reify “being Muslim” as one’s principle form of identity, rather than recognizing variation and flux in forms of Islam which encompass a multitude of other factors and influences. As Jenkins observes, some food movements, like vegetarianism and veganism, go beyond mere consumption and consumer demand, for implicated within these food practices is an “attempt to unsettle and renegotiate the values organizing broad cultural structures of relation” (79). As evidenced by the discussions of the interviewees, new interpretations are made regarding the “fundamental relations of humanity and earth” and food practices become endowed with moral and ethical meaning that influence both self-conception and cosmological worldview (79). Thus further research might consider a vegetarian foodway as a site from which to explore the negotiation and transformation of Islamic faith in ways that extend beyond official affiliation.

Conclusion

This project is distinctive in that it offers insights on vegetarianism from the viewpoint of a non-Western, non-secular collectivistic culture. Furthermore, it adds another dimension to research on Islamic foodways, and reveals the fluctuations and diversity of Islamic faith in a Muslim-majority nation. “Precisely because food is so basic and everyday, intimately involved in making homes and boundaries,” Jenkins maintains that it “serves as an arena in which to enact agency and interpret complex systems” (78). The present study presents a way of moving beyond focus on dietary laws of consumption about what a Muslim can or cannot eat, to a consideration of structures within food production that have both local and global impact. While small, a growing number of Muslim voices in popular culture are calling attention to the ethical issues of

meat and animal welfare, contending that theological precepts must be re-evaluated in light of present-day environmental crises, global food production, and the treatment and conditions of animals. Whereas food rules in traditional religious context function to create both communal identity and boundaries, the reinterpretation of those rules, in conjunction with foodways like vegetarianism which encompass more universal ethical considerations, can create a kind of commensality among divergent cultures, religions, and nations. Investigations of vegetarianism as enacted in Muslim communities can serve to bridge the gap between secular and Islamic ethical discourse about injustices in the current food regime. An approach which appeals to an Islamic framework, while yet grounded in and engaged with transnational and intercultural economic, political, and ethical issues, may serve to establish a foundation for collaborative effort towards sustainable solutions in the global food system.

Appendix 1.

Recruitment Post for the “Vegetarian/Vegan Society of Egypt” and “Plant-based Diet (Egypt)” Facebook Pages

I am seeking volunteers who would be willing to do an interview with me about being vegetarian or vegan and Muslim in Egypt. I am a graduate student at Harvard University’s Extension School, and am conducting research for my Master’s thesis, focusing on how religion might impact, change, or influence dietary choices. I am interested in talking about how and why you became vegetarian, what it is like to be vegetarian in Egypt, the role of meat in Islam and in Egyptian culture, any challenges or difficulties you face from family or friends because of your dietary choices and religion, and how vegetarianism fits within your own belief system.

Please PM me if interested. The interview should last no longer than 1-1.5 hr. I live in Maadi and am happy to meet at a place of your convenience.

Appendix 2.

Interview Questions (Original)

1. Where are you from/where did you grow up? How old are you? What do you do?
2. Tell me about your process of conversion. What inspired your decision to become vegetarian/vegan? When? What were your main reasons? Who or what influenced your choice? What was the process like?
3. How do you define “vegetarian?” How do you define or describe your own practice?
4. Is meat prepared in your home? Who prepares the food in your home, and for yourself as a vegetarian? What difficulties do you face in sharing food at home with your family? Or in going out to restaurants, or with friends?
5. What is the attitude of your family and/or friends to your being vegetarian? What are particular challenges or difficulties you face?
6. What stereotypes do you think Egyptians have about being vegetarian?
7. What is the relationship between meat and Islam? What is the role of meat in Egyptian and Islamic culture?
8. Many Egyptian holidays are celebrated with feasts centered around meat. What is your strategy in attending these meals? Do people accommodate you? Do you face challenges?
9. What is your stance on the ritual slaughter during Eid? Do you participate in the sacrifice or later celebrations? How do you handle or approach this day as a vegetarian?

10. Has anyone ever criticized or argued with you about being vegetarian on Islamic grounds? What arguments did they use? How did you respond? Has anyone ever told you you cannot be both Muslim and vegetarian?
11. Is there a connection between Islam and vegetarianism? If so, in what way(s)?
12. How does vegetarianism fit with your belief system? In what ways do your religious beliefs influence your choice?
13. In what ways has the choice to be vegetarian changed the way you interpret, think about, or practice Islam, if any?
14. In what ways has being Muslim, or living in a Muslim culture, changed the way you practice being vegetarian, or think about your food choices?
15. Do you identify as Muslim? How important is your identity as a Muslim? As a vegetarian?
16. How do you understand the relationship of humans to animals?

Appendix 3.

Interview Questions (Amended)

1. Where are you from/where did you grow up? How old are you? What do you do?
2. Tell me about your journey to becoming vegetarian.
3. How do you explain your approaches to food to others?
4. What role does religion play in your life?
5. Tell me about the connection between religion and food.
6. Tell me about your experience with 'Eid.
7. How does eating fit with your religious practice and beliefs?
8. What do Egyptians think about vegetarianism?
9. How do you understand the relationship of humans to animals?

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