RAMADAN, LIVED RELIGION, AND THE CELEBRATION OF AMBIGUITY

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In this paper, I demonstrate how the lived practice of Ramadan in the UK signifies a tolerance and celebration of ambiguity in everyday life. I position my work against Bauer's (2021) argument that Muslims have become increasingly unaccepting of ambiguity and that this "intolerance of ambiguity in modern Islam is a phenomenon of modernity" (29). Rather, my participants tolerated seemingly contradictory ideas, embracing subjectivity and contrasting a post-Enlightenment emphasis on certainty and objective truth.
I demonstrate these subjective and ambiguous attitudes and practices through several examples. Firstly, participants displayed an ambiguous approach to sacred times. This is explored in the context of variant methods of moonsighting – to determine the start and end of Islamic months – and the perceived unknowability of one of the most sacred times of the year, *Laylatu-l-qadr* (The Night of Power). Secondly, participants expressed paradoxical attitudes towards food, simultaneously shunning and rejoicing in bodily desires.

My paper contributes to several contemporary understandings of Islam – including the works of Thomas Bauer (2021) and Shahab Ahmed (2016) – which tend towards the idea that Muslims today have become increasingly intolerant of ambiguity and subjectivity instead adopting more rigid and binary positions. I contrast such arguments, displaying particularly how the everyday, often domestic, practice of Islam is more nuanced and complex than public discourses might reveal. Furthermore, I argue that studies of everyday, mundane aspects of religion are vital in illuminating our understanding of Islam in the modern world.

1. THEORIES ON MODERN ISLAM AND AMBIGUITY

Prominent contemporary works in Islamic Studies like Thomas Bauer's (2021) *A Culture of Ambiguity* and Shahab Ahmed's (2016) *What is Islam?* have made the argument that while Islam historically has had a rich tradition of ambiguity, ambivalence and entertaining contradiction, Muslims today favour unequivocality and are, in Bauer's (2021) terms "intolerant" of ambiguity. Scharbrodt (2022, 12) has reflected on this parallel between the two authors' arguments in his recent work on the life of twentieth century Muslim scholar Muhammad ʿAbduh. Bauer (2021) argues this intolerance by Muslim societies has been

influenced significantly by the modern West and its emphasis on certainty and the search for truth. While he does not address the Enlightenment in great depth, it is clear to see how key Enlightenment ideas around certainty, reason and objective truth are reflected in Bauer's discussion of the unequivocal Western stance. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2007 [1991]) has made similar arguments in terms of a general turn away from ambivalence in modern societies though argues postmodernity may be a period in which the ambivalence inherent in human actions can start to be accepted again.

This paper, conversely, argues against Bauer's (2021) and Ahmed's (2016) contentions that contemporary Muslims have abandoned Islam's tradition and tolerance of ambiguity using examples from my research exploring lived experiences of Ramadan in the UK in 2020. Through these, I demonstrate how my Muslims participants embraced and celebrated apparent contradictions in their religious practices and conceptions of the world. Before moving on to those examples, it is important to emphasise that Bauer's (2021) understanding of ambiguity is not simply a lack of clarity, as the author elaborates in his definition:

> "We may talk of the phenomenon of cultural ambiguity if, over a period of time, two contrary, or at least competing, clearly differing meanings are associated with one and the same term, act or object; or if a social group draws on contrary or strongly differing discourses for attributions of meaning to various realms of human life; or if one group simultaneously accepts different interpretations of a phenomenon, all of them entitled to equal validity" (Bauer 2021: 10).

While this is a lengthy definition, the emphasis is on "contrary" or "competing" meanings associated with "a term, act or object" within one social group at the same time (10). If these meanings are not held simultaneously, Bauer deems it not to be cultural ambiguity but simply "competing norms" (10). John D. Caputo's quote – which Bauer references – sheds light on the abundance of meanings inherent in understanding ambiguity which is especially relevant to this paper. For Caputo, ambiguity is "an excess of meaning, a multiplication of too many meanings, so that we find ourselves drawn in several directions at once" (Caputo, J.D. 2005 in Bauer 2021: 15). This further relates to Ahmed's (2016) discussion of similar ideas wherein he argues that Muslims have been able "to conceptualize Islam in terms of contradictory meaning-making and to live as Muslims in those contradictory terms of Islam" (404).

But how does cultural ambiguity function in practice? Bauer (2021) gives a hypothetical example of a society that seeks medical treatment from both 'magical healers' and 'trained physicians'. He argues that the coexistence and validation of both types of treatment simultaneously in a particular group of people is classed as "cultural ambiguity" (10). Throughout his book he draws on case studies from Islamic societies including diverse and contrasting interpretations of the Qur'an (Chapter 3) and hadiths (Chapter 4), as well as his argument that Islamic traditions have considered sexual desire in an ambiguous way, at least historically, in contrast with Western attempts to rigidly categorise sexuality (Chapter 7).[1] These examples highlight the way in which Bauer's theory can be applied theologically and sociologically as will be displayed below in examples surrounding the British experience of Ramadan.

It is helpful to elaborate on the terminology Bauer (2021) uses to discuss the ways in which ambiguity has been dealt with by people since these will be used in this paper and are central to the arguments presented. Bauer discusses being "tolerant" or "intolerant" of ambiguity throughout his work to describe ways in which societies have accepted or rejected cultural ambiguity. He introduces these concepts as follows:

> "All cultures have to live with cultural ambiguity. Cultures differ, however, in how they deal with it. Ambiguity can be tolerated and consciously enacted through conventions of politeness and diplomacy, and through rites and works of art, thus performing important cultural functions. On the other hand, ambiguity can be avoided and opposed. In other words, cultures are different in relation to their *tolerance of ambiguity*." (3, italics in original)

While Bauer borrows the idea of "tolerance of ambiguity" from psychologists, he explains that he is applying it in a sociological sense (3), a usage I follow in this article. While the tolerance/intolerance framing of ambiguity could be critiqued for being over – simplified (and perhaps *un*ambiguous), Bauer nuances these ideas with discussion of the "domestication" of ambiguity. While he argues that Muslim cultures have been tolerant of ambiguity, it does not mean, for Bauer, that everything Muslims do or conceive is vague and open-ended. On the contrary, the Islamic tolerance of ambiguity has meant that strategies have been implemented in order to "domesticate" the ambiguity. These processes have resulted in "a certain amount of ambiguity that has become open to assessment, and thus socially manageable" (32, italics in original). Some examples of such domestication according to Bauer relate to the recitation and interpretation of the Qur'an which have variants that compete and contrast, but these variants exist within a widely accepted theological consensus (Chapters 2 and 3).

As aforementioned however, Bauer's overarching argument is that such tolerance and acceptance of ambiguity has diminished in Muslim societies in the contemporary period. He notes that he is referring largely to modern Salafi and reform movements which he feels have taken precedence over more traditional forms of Islam (8) though Scharbrodt (2022) convincingly argues against this in his biographical exploration of reformist Muhammad ʿAbduh. Bauer (2021) also applies the term "modern Islam" with a broad brush, seeming to refer to contemporary Muslims as a whole. Bauer further argues that "intolerance of ambiguity in modern Islam is a phenomenon of modernity" (29), something I critique below in reference to my own findings which complicate this idea by demonstrating how ambiguous attitudes and practices are maintained during Ramadan despite modernity.

As mentioned in this article's opening, Bauer's (2021) ideas resonate with those of Shahab Ahmed (2016) who describes "perplexity" or "*hayrat*" as a "normative Islamic value" (278) and reflects extensively on such ideas in Chapter 5 which includes in its title "Ambivalence and Ambiguity, Metaphor and Paradox". Within this, Ahmed describes "the historically demonstrated capacity of Muslims to live with contradictory truths *as Islam* – that is, to live with *Islam as paradox*" (401, italics in original). Paradox comes through as a key theme for my own participants – particularly in relation to attitudes towards food – which again contrasts Ahmed's suggestion of the diminishing acceptance of such contradictions amongst Muslims today. Rather, he asserts that modern Muslim societies do "not allow for more than a narrow space for the entertainment of contradiction in terms of Islam" (381, 2016).

In the next section, I outline, conversely, how my research participants accepted and often celebrated such contradictions in their conceptualisations and practices of the month of Ramadan.

2. Ambiguity in Ramadan

Ramadan is the Islamic month of fasting, a ritual which Muslims observe globally as well as in the UK. Alongside fasting, there are various associated traditions in Ramadan related to food and eating – including breaking the fast communally – as well as worship rituals like reciting the Qur'an, and the nightly *tarāwīḥ* prayers that are unique to this month. From an outside perspective, Ramadan could be perceived as a time of certainty and structure, with prescribed rules in relation to fasting and a rigid regime of ritual observance including fasting and *ṣalāt*. What characterised responses from my participants, however, were the ambiguous and paradoxical dimensions of the month.

The findings discussed below are drawn from photo diaries submitted as part of my PhD research by 51 UK-based participants during Ramadan 2020[2] as well as follow-up interviews with 22 of these individuals. I elaborate on understandings of sacred time, including the sighting of the moon and the search for *Laylatu-l-qadr*, followed by paradoxical conceptions of and practices towards food. These cases outline how modern-day experiences of Ramadan can be conceived as ambiguous. Such experiences do not align clearly with the Enlightenment emphasis on certainty and objective truth and provide a critique of Bauer's (2021) and Ahmed's (2016) arguments about the anti-ambiguous trends within modern Islam and the impact of Western paradigms on Muslim societies today.

2.1 Sacred Time

2.1.1 Moonsighting and Determining Islamic Months

While the Islamic calendar follows a clear pattern of twelve months which determine the observance of religious festivals including Ramadan, it is a lunar calendar dependent on the presence of the new crescent moon to determine the start (and thus, end) of Islamic months. This means there is uncertainty around whether a particular Islamic month will last 29 or 30 days since a moon cycle is 29.5 days. More importantly, this means Muslims following different methods of moonsighting often start and end months on different days. This is especially pertinent in Ramadan because the determining the days of fasting (i.e., the days of Ramadan) is dependent on the lunar cycle as is the celebration of *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr* at the end of the month. This was reflected in my fieldwork as there was variation in when participants started fasting, some starting on Friday 24th April 2020 and others on Saturday 25th, although all seemed to celebrate *ʿĪd* on the same day. This also meant that some fasted 29 days and others 30 days. Participants related different methods for determining the start of Ramadan, with some following Saudi Arabia's sighting, some using the "local sighting method" (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 1), i.e., looking for the moon in one's own country/locality, and others explaining they followed a more global method which considers any moon

sighting around the world to determine the start of the month (Zahra, Interview).[3] Noor also spoke of the method of following "Morocco, the nearest Muslim country" although she implied the mosque her family used as the authority for the start of Ramadan not followed Morocco – the sighting followed by other mosques in her area – instead opting to start a day earlier (Noor, Diary, Entry 1). Noor's example highlights that, while some Muslims actively choose a moon sighting method, others base decisions on their local mosque and are less concerned about the particular method. This is not surprising given that collective rituals such as *ʿĪd* prayers and *tarāwīḥ* prayers which are contingent on moonsighting are organised largely by mosques.

The variation in defining Islamic months, even amongst my limited sample of 51 UK participants, hints towards the fluidity and ambiguity of time in Muslim conceptions of sacredness. However, it was interesting to observe how some participants accepted this ambiguity easily, while others struggled. Rayyan told me, for example, that she and her husband followed different methods of moonsighting and said, "This has been the way for all of our 9-year marriage including different Eids with no issues" (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 1). She did, however, note during interview that their extended family were less happy with this practice. Similarly, Noor justified such differences of opinion saying that "Allah's mercy is not limited to a certain day" (Noor, Diary, Entry 1) and Juwairiah said there was a "magic" about not knowing when *ʿĪd* was going to fall (Juwairiah, Interview). Despite this, Noor admitted she had struggled to come to terms with the differences in the Islamic calendar over the years, previously spending hours researching moonsighting methods only to realise that, "my mum actually felt more comfortable following the biggest mosque...rather than trying to sift through the evidence and make a decision" (Noor, Diary, Entry 1). Noor also relayed her desire to have *ʿĪd* on the same day, "if not for the whole country, for each individual city" (Noor, Diary, Entry 1). James expressed frustration that Muslims in Britain largely do not follow local moon sightings – the method he deemed valid – commenting that they rather "follow like sheep" (James, WhatsApp message[4]). Some of these concerns about Muslims starting Ramadan and celebrating *ʿĪd* on different days concur with Bauer's (2021) argument that a "tolerance of ambiguity" is being lost in the contemporary era, however this sentiment was not expressed amongst all, or even the majority of my participants. Rayyan and her husband's contrasting practices related to moonsighting encapsulate this, and most participants took a more relaxed and tolerant attitude towards the differences in moonsighting than those expressed by James.

Conversely, if one looks at current debates online around moonsighting, which seem to have gained increasing prominence around Ramadan and the *ʿĪd*s of 2023, the picture looks different. These include a call by prominent American Muslim scholar Yasir Qadhi for Muslim groups to consider adopting the calculation method by which Islamic months can be determined far in advance, an arguably rational, unambiguous approach to sacred times. He asserts this will avoid tensions and has logistical benefits of "knowing when Eid is" though cautiously warns readers not to "have a hatred in your heart to those who follow another opinion".[5] British Muslim group, the New Crescent Society, have been more ardent in their support for a singular approach to moonsighting (namely, the local, UK sighting method) arguing that announcements from Saudi Arabia – which many UK mosques follow for determining Islamic months – are often "astronomically impossible"[6]. Such approaches

could be used to evidence Bauer's (2021) argument that modern Muslims' ability to tolerate ambiguity is decreasing. It is important, however, to acknowledge their online social media context in which public debates about religious authority thrive. In fact, this seems to be a shortcoming in Bauer's (2021) work more broadly, in that his argument is largely based on public and/or scholarly debates. This is clearly seen in a section (66–69) where Bauer uses debates between a website aimed at criticising Islamic ideas and online responses from Muslims to support his argument that "no Muslim author apparently dares to celebrate the diversity of variant readings [of the Qur'an]" (67). I assert that looking at day-to-day, lived experiences broadens the picture and provides nuance. While some participants maintained a rigid attitude towards moonsighting, many accepted and often celebrated uncertainties around religious festivals and times. I maintain that the divergent lived practices and ambiguous attitudes of Muslims in my study largely demonstrate an understanding of sacred time as fluid and ambiguous, encapsulated by Noor's statement above emphasising the expansiveness of God's mercy. This is supported further by the example of *Laylatu-l-qadr.*

2.1.2 The Unknowability of Laylatu-l-qadr

Laylatu-l-qadr (The Night of Power), regarded as the night on which the Qur'an was first revealed, is commonly believed to fall during the last ten nights of Ramadan. It was considered by many participants to be the highpoint of the Islamic calendar, as Zunayra deemed it, "the most blessed night of the whole year" (Zunayra, Diary, Entry 20). The night is described in the Qur'an as being "better than a thousand months" (Q. 97:3, Saheeh International) and participant Abdullah paraphrased this calling *Laylatu-l-qadr* "the night of a thousand nights" (Abdullah, Diary, Introduction). In practice, as conveyed by participants, many Muslims increase their acts of worship during the last ten nights of Ramadan to "seek this special night" (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14) and the increased *ajr* (religious merit) associated with it. The exact date, however, according to participants, was unknown giving *Laylatu-l-qadr* an aura of ambiguity. This unknowability has a basis in Islamic scripture being linked to a hadith where Prophet Muhammad stated:

> "I came out to inform you about the Night of Al-Qadr [i.e. *Laylatu-l-qadr*], but as so-and-so and so-and-so quarrelled, so the news about it had been taken away; and maybe it was better for you." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 78, Hadith 79[7])

There was a common understanding amongst participants that *Laylatu-l-qadr* fell on one of the odd nights in the last ten days, as summarised by Zunayra:

> "The last ten nights are the most blessed, the most blessed night of the whole year is called Laylat ul Qadr, which is thought to fall on one of the last 5 odd number nights – the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th, or 29th." (Zunayra, Diary, Entry 20)

Others, however, asserted that *Laylatu-l-qadr* could be on any one of the last ten nights, as Iffat stated, "It is very important that we try to make the most of these ten nights and not just focus on the odd nights as we don't know which day exactly laylatul qadr will fall

in." (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22). One participant's diary conveyed that the night was either the 27th or the 29th (Abdullah, Diary, Entry 26), and others explained how they held particular significance to the 27th night – and thus conducted special acts of worship within it – while maintaining the exact date was unknown. Noor was amongst these, helpfully highlighting this diversity of opinion:

> "It's just, kind of, understood that the 27th day of Ramadan or the 27th night of Ramadan is a night with a high chance of being *Laylatu-l-qadr*...even though it could be any of the last ten nights of Ramadan, particularly the odd ones, and some people say it could even be any night of the whole year." (Noor, Diary [Audio], Entry 27)

Noor further linked the ambiguity of *Laylatu-l-qadr* to the variable start dates of Ramadan, conveying how she would be worshipping on both the 27th and 28th nights "just to cover all bases" (Noor, Diary, Entry 27). Her statements display a high level of ambiguity and internal contradiction in entertaining the possibility of occasion taking place during any night while at the same time maintaining certain nights have a greater "chance" of being *Laylatu-l-qadr*.

The comments and practices of participants displayed here, who seemed to ubiquitously accept the indeterminate nature of *Laylatu-l-qadr*, highlight the "tolerance" of ambiguity that Bauer (2021) describes. The fact this tolerance was exhibited in the context of what many deemed the most sacred time of the year, demonstrates how cultural ambiguity is a fundamental part of Muslim beliefs and practices in the present day. This contrasts Bauer's argument that ambiguity has diminished in contemporary Muslim societies. No participants expressed a certainty as to when the *Laylatu-l-qadr* fell, or even a desire to consolidate its precise date, in contrast with some of the opinions on moonsighting. In fact, participants seemed to revel in the ambiguity of the sacred night, resulting in what was commonly referred to as "searching for" or "seeking" *Laylatu-l-qadr* through increased acts of worship during the last ten nights of Ramadan[8]. This was apparent in Iffat's encouragement of her social media followers to worship throughout the last ten days, as displayed in her Instagram diary (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22). Lucy also demonstrates how the somewhat bounded, somewhat diffuse nature of *Laylatu-l-qadr,* seems to facilitate a sense of community and togetherness:

> "There is a sense of urgency now as we hope to find ourselves awake and praying on the night of Laylatul Qadr. I use the plural pronoun because whilst I am alone, at the same time there is a sense of community and connected hearts and intentions as all Muslims seek this special night." (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14)

This supports Donald N. Levine's (1985) argument – in his book which addresses the modern aversion to ambiguity – that such ambiguity can have a "socially binding function" (35–36).

While Ramadan is a delineated time period, with the lengths of the fast following specified rules, I have highlighted in this section the ambiguous understandings of sacred time from the perspectives of my participants. I argue that the different practices of moonsighting and the unknowability of *Laylatu-l-qadr* were phenomena that were largely or wholly accepted

by participants demonstrating a tolerance of ambiguity. Such experiences oppose Bauer's (2021) and Ahmed's (2016) arguments that Muslims in the present day are intolerant of ambiguity and prefer more fixed interpretations and practices in regard to their religion. I have also highlighted – especially in the case of moonsighting – how my focus on lived, everyday religion has enabled me to critique Bauer's (2021) arguments which are often based on scholarly debates providing only one side of the picture. In the next section, I explore paradoxical attitudes and practices towards food during Ramadan that were integral to my participants' experiences of the month.

2.2 The Paradox of Food

2.2.1 "It's Not About the Food"

Food was one of the most commonly discussed topics amongst my research participants both in their diaries and interviews and thus seemed significant in their experiences of the holy month. However, Ramadan fasting is, almost by definition, a practice which encourages a shift of attention away from food and bodily desires. The ritual involves abstaining from food, drink and sexual intercourse for a significant portion of the day – dawn until sunset – for 29 or 30 days. Participants suggested this act of denial played an important role in enhancing their spirituality as described by Sarah, who said "when you stop feeding your body, you're feeding the soul, and it has more space" (Sarah, Interview). Similarly, Mariya referred to the eschewing of food, drink and sex saying that "you suppress your animal side, the body needs to focus on your spiritual...then your body needs are minimal, less than you expect" (Mariya, Interview). Several respondents discussed the Islamic concept of the *nafs* – the bodily self and desires – describing how fasting is about "fighting your *nafs*, making your *nafs* smaller" (Jennifer, Interview) and "not surrendering your *nafs* to food and drink" (Layla, Interview). Similar ideas about controlling the *nafs* are discussed in Rytter's (2016) study of a Ramadan *i'tikāf*[9] retreat with Dutch Muslims, and Hellman's (2008) discussion of eating practices during Ramadan in Java. It appears then that the abstinent nature of the fast de-emphasises the role of food in Muslims' daily lives.

Similarly, participants stressed the simplicity of Ramadan food, further rejecting the prominence of this bodily desire in their lives. The word "simple" was often used to describe food in diaries and interviews. Mariya's photo of her fish-finger sandwich (Figure 1) epitomises this, with Mariya noting that she chose it as her first diary image "because I want to emphasise that Ramadan is not about food. Simple iftar works well too!" (Mariya, Diary, Entry 1). I also received images from other participants depicting their "simple" meals (Figures 2 and 3). As can be observed in these images, the concept of "simple" Ramadan food meant different things to different participants, the descriptor being ambiguous in this sense. Nonetheless, the idea that Ramadan food should be simple was an important discursive principle shared by many signifying again the "socially binding function" (Levine 1985: 35–36) of such ambiguous ideas. Along with the abstinent nature of fasting, the emphasis on simplicity was another means by which participants sought to reduce the focus on food in Ramadan.

FIGURE 1. Mariya's Iftar (Mariya, Diary, Eentry 1)

FIGURE 2. Nicola's Iftar (Nicola, Diary, Entry 1)

FIGURE 3. Syeda's Iftar (Syeda, Diary, Entry 28)

2.2.2 Celebrating Food

On the other hand, food took on a celebratory tone during the holy month. This was largely related to communal practices. Firstly, participants suggested they ate together with their family or wider community more frequently in Ramadan than at other times of the year. Deena describes this in her home context:

> "Regular life always means we all eat at different times but Ramadan is the one time we all sit together watching a terrible Arab TV show and laughing together. Nothing fancy but wouldn't trade it for anything in the world." (Deena, Diary, Day 4)

Similarly, Layla described how she would normally go to the mosque every night with her family members to break the fast with the wider community.[10] She prioritised this over work stating that, "if I need to leave early to make iftar, you know, I'm not going to sit on a train and have *iftar*...life is better than having *iftar* on a train by yourself... it's bigger than work" (Layla, Interview). Parents that I spoke to also mentioned making special types of food during the month to make it more enjoyable for their children. One of these, Jennifer, interestingly commented that "I want them [my children] to love Ramadan, even if that's partly through their *nafs* [laughs]". This somewhat contradicts the de-emphasising of the *nafs* described above. These periods of communal eating were valued by participants and seen as times of joy during which food and communality were celebrated.

Complementing this, the practice of sharing food in Ramadan was almost ubiquitous amongst the Muslims in my study as often depicted in their diaries (Figure 4). The fact this practice was maintained even during the COVID-19 lockdown – via involvement in charity campaigns, or doorstep deliveries to neighbours – demonstrates its importance.

It was, according to participants, an act inspired by the example of Prophet Muhammad that would be rewarded by God. Participants highlighted how the preparation of special or "fancier food" (Rayyan, Interview) was aimed towards sharing it with others with Rayyan noting that this increased culinary effort was "to take care of the fasting people" and to gain "extra reward" (Rayyan, Interview). Similarly, Mehmooda said that, "in the Pakistani culture, we say if you feed someone during *iftar*, it's really good that they go *above*...above the limits, like, they go and make *everything*" (Mehmooda, Interview, italics indicate emphasis in speech). While Mehmooda was conflicted as to whether this attitude was excessive from an Islamic perspective, she nonetheless highlights how sharing food contributes to the celebratory tone of cooking and eating during the holy month.

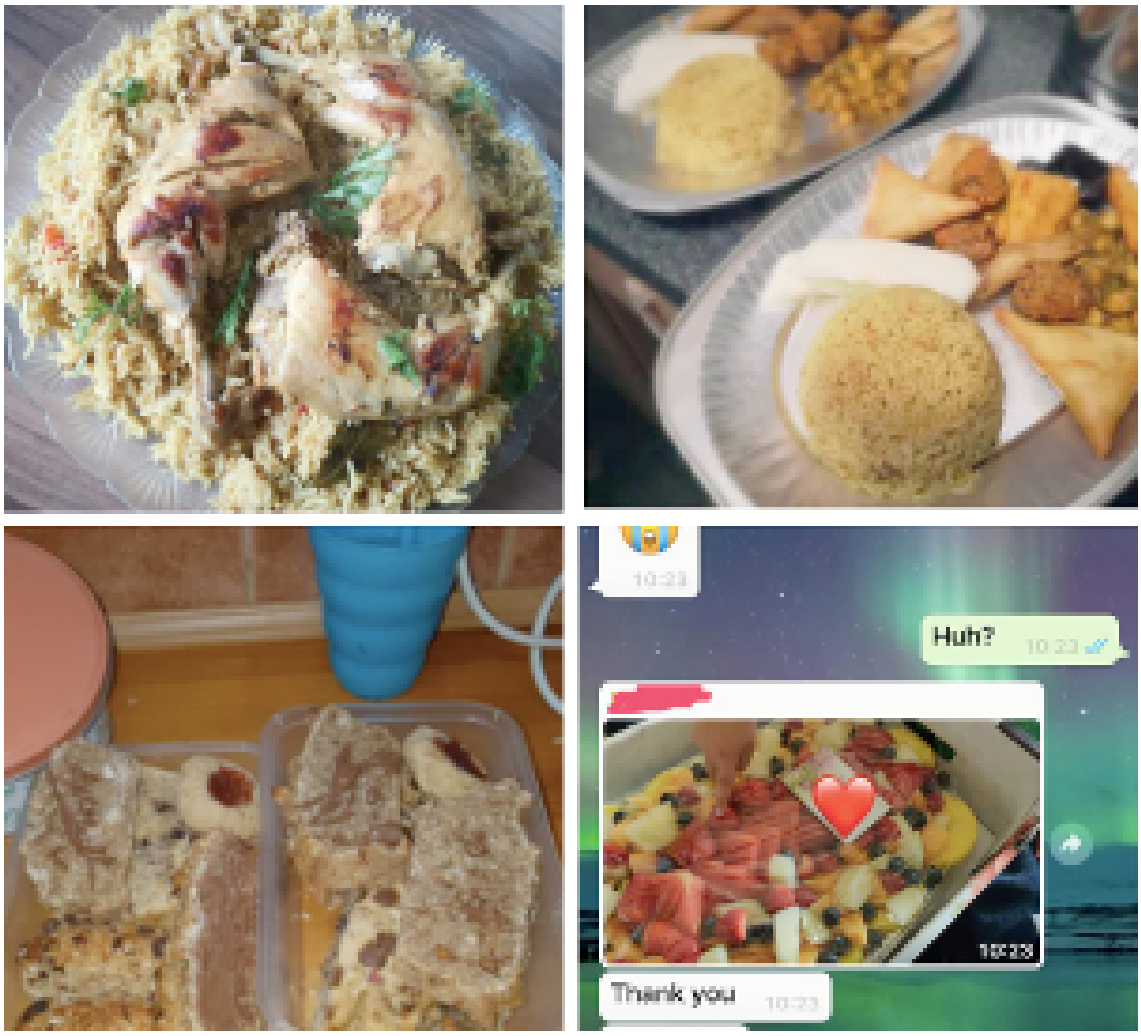

FIGURE 4. Food Shared with Others by Participants (Various Diaries)

2.2.3 Food and Its Abundance of Meaning

It is apparent from these two simultaneous yet seemingly opposing approaches to food how practices and attitudes around eating and consumption in Ramadan present as paradoxical; Ramadan seems to promote a disciplining of bodily desires while also providing opportunities for worldly enjoyment and rejoicing in this. Participants themselves were aware of this apparent contradiction, as reflected in their comments below:

"Every year I try and calm people down with the food because it's not about food, but it, kind of, is about food and [laughs]..." (Jennifer, Interview)

"So, I guess Ramadan – it's kind of like a paradox because Ramadan is about not eating food but it's also about food [laughing]." (Noor, Interview)

"Even though my mum *did* provide all this food, the point was not to provide all the food [laughing]." (Rayyan, Interview)

I argue that, like understandings of sacred times during Ramadan, Muslims in my study demonstrated that an abundance of meaning was ascribed to food during the holy month. This is reflective of Bauer's theory of cultural ambiguity (2021) and Caputo's (2005) similar conception of ambiguity mentioned above. My participants were largely content in tolerating and accepting such ambiguity as part and parcel of their eating and fasting practices during Ramadan. One exception was Mariya who conveyed repeatedly throughout her interview that Ramadan is "not about food" (Mariya, Interview) but this set her apart from other participants who were much more moderate in their approaches, recognising and accepting the paradox as exemplified in the above quotes. My argument in this section is supported by wider research on modern-day Ramadan experiences too. Marjo Buitelaar (1993) notes how "fasting is paradoxically accompanied by a preoccupation with food" (184) in Moroccan conceptions of the month, and Hellman (2008) describes the "ambiguity of *nafsu*[11]" (222) in reference to eating in Ramadan in Java, Indonesia. Rather than symbolising a paradox, Hellman argues that, "during Ramadan, the ambivalence towards consumption is resolved" (220) but his findings nonetheless imply ambiguous understandings of food and bodily desires in his research context.

The findings in this section then, contrast Bauer's (2021) contention that a tolerance of ambiguity is being lost in modern Muslim cultures as well as Ahmed's (2016) assertion that modern Islam does not give space for the "entertainment of contradiction" that was once fundamental to Muslims' approach to life (381). The paradoxical approaches to food displayed by my participants do not conform to a modern, Enlightenment trend towards the search for objective truth and certainty with participants simultaneously displaying positive and negative attitudes towards the role of food in their lives. Their assertions that Ramadan was both "about" and "not about" food also contrast an emphasis on categorisation which has been described as a key feature of Enlightenment thinking (Luebering [undated]). By complicating Bauer's (2021) argument which relies on the impact of modernity, I critique the idea of the fundamental shift between pre-modern and modern thinking which dominates much of the sociology of religion including studies of Islam like Bauer's (2021) and Ahmed's (2016). While I have focused on conceptions of food, the findings relate to broader Muslim understandings of bodily desires and the human being's actions and purpose within the material world as indicated by participant discussions around the *nafs*. My findings thus suggest that such ambiguities are fundamental to Muslim beliefs and practices and their conceptions of life and its relation to the afterlife.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated here, through empirical examples of my participants' lived experiences of Ramadan, how contemporary Muslims in the UK exhibit what Bauer (2021) refers to as a "tolerance" of ambiguity. I have first discussed how sacred times during Ramadan are conceived as diffuse and ambiguous. For this, I drew on cases of variant practices around moonsighting to determine the start and end of the month as well as participants' acceptance of the unknowability of the precise date of *Laylatu-l-qadr*. I have secondly demonstrated how conceptions of consumption and bodily desires were conceived as paradoxical in the context of Ramadan, with food-related practices reflecting such contradictions. Such examples, as well as others I discuss in my thesis (Jones 2022), have led me to conceptualise my participants' experience of Ramadan as "a month of ambiguity".

While recent Islamic Studies works by Bauer (2021) and Ahmed (2016) reflect extensively on the positive attitudes towards ambiguity, paradoxes and contradictions which have characterised Muslim societies historically, both assert that such attitudes are diminishing in the modern day. Bauer (2021), in particular, blames this loss of ambiguity on the influence of the modern West which is characterised by its "fear of ambiguity" and "obsession with truth" (213), and one can see how Enlightenment emphases on objective truth and certainty resonate with such ideas. My findings provide a critique of such arguments demonstrating how ambiguity and paradoxes are embraced by contemporary Muslims in the day-to-day observance of their religion. Such findings contest the way in which the frameworks of modernity and the Enlightenment – and their seemingly inevitable influence – have been applied to studies of Muslims today. Rather, I argue that Muslims in the examples I provided have followed their own trajectory of development which has its foundations in early conceptions of Islam and the tradition of ambiguity that Bauer (2021) and Ahmed (2016) convincingly outline.

My work builds on that of Oliver Scharbrodt (2022) who uses the ideas and life of 20th century reform scholar Muhammad 'Abduh to contrast Bauer's (2021) and Ahmed's (2016) arguments. Scharbrodt asserts that "as 'Abduh illustrates…the pre-modern legacy of cultural ambiguity in Islamic intellectual and cultural life has survived in different iterations" (2022: 232). While Scharbrodt, however, postulates that Muslims in more recent times may have had to adopt more unambiguous positions due to social conditions (232), my work suggests that an acceptance of ambiguity persists, at least in the context of everyday, quotidian practices. I suggest that my focus on lived religion – rather than public discourse and debates associated with scholars or prominent Muslim figures – has shed light on the conclusions drawn by academics like Bauer (2021) and Ahmed (2016) which assert the modern intolerance of ambiguity in Muslim societies.

I conclude by encouraging Islamic Studies scholars to take seriously the insights that can be gained from 'lived religion' research on Muslims today and I argue such explorations can illuminate discussions of Islam in the contemporary world. My findings have highlighted a modern tolerance of ambiguity amongst Muslims that may have been missed by Bauer's (2021) focus largely on scholarly discourse and debates. My use of participant-solicited photo diaries to observe everyday rituals of participants also benefitted the exploration of such ambiguities which may be easy to overlook when analysing textual and discursive sources

like Bauer. My work critiques the tendency in the sociology of religion, and religious studies more broadly, to universally apply the frameworks of post-Reformation, modernity, and the Enlightenment. While such frameworks are valid in many scenarios, I encourage Islamic Studies scholars to consider ways in which modern Islam has developed independently of Western thought and has maintained its own distinctiveness in the face of wider trajectories.

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NOTES

1. I give a more comprehensive overview of Bauer's (2021) work, as well as comparing it with Shahab Ahmed's (2016) *What is Islam?,* in my book review (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). Scharbrodt (2022) also provides a helpful comparison of both authors' work (2022: 9–13).
2. It is worth noting that during this period the UK was under 'lockdown' due to the COVID-19 pandemic meaning mosques were closed and communal activities limited. I don't explore this extensively in this article but have discussed this elsewhere (Jones-Ahmed 2022b).
3. An article by American Islamic scholar, Hamza Yusuf, suggests there is a similar breadth of moonsighting practices amongst Muslims in North America (Yusuf 2006: 4).
4. James sent me a WhatsApp message about moonsighting before starting his diary and agreed for me to include the contents of this message in my research.
5. @YasirQadhi, Twitter post, 22 April 2023, 3.55 p.m. Available at: https://twitter.com/YasirQadhi/status/1649788935290191872?t=9vHN8NJZK91exDMHvYW2KA&s=08 [Accessed: 4 July 2023].
6. @NewCrescentSoc, Twitter post, 18 June 2023, 9.08 p.m. Available at: https://twitter.com/NewCrescentSoc/status/1670523781905895427?t=WEALssIll627ScS7iKfEtg&s=08 [Accessed: 4 July 2023].
7. Available at: https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6049 (Accessed: 5 August 2022).
8. Mol (2017), exploring the occasion from a textual perspective, similarly highlights how the uncertainty of *Laylatu-l-qadr* led to the common practice "searching" for the night (93).
9. A period of ritual seclusion that predominantly takes place during the last ten days of Ramadan.
10. Layla did not do this in 2020 during my fieldwork since mosques were closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown and remarked on how this loss had a significant mental and emotional impact on her.
11. Alternative word for *nafs* amongst Hellman's (2008) participants.