

**A Path of Justice and Compassion:**  
**About Vegan Muslims and Islamic Veganism**



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## Abstract

Veganism is a social movement that appears to be more than a fad, but dedicated to achieve a wider cultural shift. It manifests as a global phenomenon that affects individuals from all walks of life in a profound way. Islam is and will remain the largest and fastest growing religion with followers in most countries of the world. A growing number of Muslims from a variety of backgrounds are adopting veganism, as evident on various online platforms. This dissertation discusses the connection between Islam and veganism, explores the ethics and beliefs of some of those who consider themselves to be both vegan and Muslim, and offers a glimpse into the world of vegan Muslims' online advocacy. The present study shows that concerns for animal rights are the most significant reason to adopt veganism for Muslim research participants, while other reasons, such as environmentalism, social justice, personal health and piety, are important too. Some Muslims explicitly link their veganism to religious or spiritual attitudes, while others see it as a personal decision independent from their beliefs. Spiritual and religious attitudes of vegan Muslims differ greatly, while ethical concerns appear to be a unifying theme. This dissertation further presents the case for 'Islamic Veganism', as a distinct vegan understanding of Islam. In this effort it argues that *shari'a* (here as Islamic law) can be used to advance the cause of veganism by implementing stricter animal rights laws in Muslim majority countries.

# Table of contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Table of contents.....	iv
List of Figures .....	v
Introduction .....	1
a) Literature Review .....	3
b) Methodology .....	8
c) Chapter outline .....	11
Chapter 2: Islam and Veganism.....	13
a) Reconciling Islam and Veganism .....	15
b) Challenging anthropocentrism in Islam with Sarra Tlili .....	21
c) The changing meaning of <i>khalifa</i> .....	24
Chapter 3: Becoming and being a vegan Muslim.....	29
Chapter 4: Vegan Muslims .....	37
a) The ‘Vegan Muslim Community’ – A survey .....	38
b) Online advocates.....	48
Chapter 5: Conclusion – Towards ‘Islamic Veganism’ .....	53
a) Shari’a for Animal Protection .....	55
b) Islamic Veganism.....	59
Bibliography .....	63

# List of Figures

Figure 1: Reasons for the adoption of veganism, Duke McLeod 2018 ..... 41

Figure 2: Denomination of Participants, Duke McLeod 2018 .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 3: Attitudes towards Islam, Duke McLeod 2018 ..... 43

Figure 4: Region of Origin, Duke McLeod 2018..... 45

Figure 5: Region of current residence, Duke McLeod 2018.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

# Introduction

“But what has Veganism to do with Islam?” – Anonymous

Both Muslims and non-Muslims regularly display confusion when they hear about this research topic or my identity as a vegan Muslim. This confusion is perhaps generated by the impression of veganism as a ‘western’ concept and lifestyle on the one hand and the image of meat-eating, sheep-slaughtering Muslims on the other hand. It is certainly true that the vast majority of Muslims eat animals and animal products and a great number partake directly or indirectly in blood sacrifice. It is also true that veganism as a contemporary movement and phenomenon is predominantly rooted in ‘western’ discourses about justice and ethics (Stepaniak 2000). However, veganism is taken up by a growing number of Muslims with diverse backgrounds, who share the ethical concerns of non-Muslim vegans in regards to animal rights. This dissertation aims to resolve the confusion described above, by exploring the connection between veganism and Islam and as well as the ethics and beliefs of those who identify as both vegan and Muslim. It offers a glimpse into the world of online advocacy of selected vegan Muslims and discusses the results of a survey conducted by the author. In doing so, it demonstrates that not only is there no inherent contradiction between Islam and veganism, but that a focus on the issues raised by ethical veganism can aid Muslims to rediscover aspects of their religion that are contemporarily lost or neglected.

Several reasons have been identified as important factors in the decision of Muslims to adopt a vegan lifestyle, such as animal rights, environmentalism, social justice, personal health and piousness. Of these this dissertation focuses on animal rights and human-nonhuman (and to a lesser degree human-nature) relationships in its discussion. It further highlights the diversity amongst vegan Muslims, regarding their geographical backgrounds as well as their attitudes towards spirituality and religion. These differences are sometimes expressed in the way vegan Muslims reconcile veganism

and Islam. While some see Islam and veganism operating in distinct spheres of their lives, others see a strong correlation between vegan and Islamic ethics and see their choice to adopt veganism as a consequence of their adherence to the latter. Yet, even Muslims who profess that their adoption of veganism was a private decision independent of their religion, reference religious sources to justify their choice and to promote their ideals.

The strong relationship between veganism and Islam uncovered in this research, supported by the fact that some Muslims base their decision to adopt veganism squarely in their beliefs, leads me to propose that a synthesis of veganism and Islam could lead to the establishment of a distinct philosophical understanding of Islam, which I will label 'Islamic Veganism'. This dissertation starts the discussion about how 'Islamic Veganism' could look like and argues that a strict application of *shari'a* (Islamic law) to issues concerning human-nonhuman relationships can lead to a dramatic reduction of the number of animals bred, raised and killed for consumption by declaring method and product of contemporary food production systems as irreconcilable with Islamic law and thus impermissible for Muslims. 'Islamic Veganism' can utilise a contextual approach to Islamic primary sources, as a discussion of non-anthropocentric readings of the *Qur'an* and selected *hadith* (reported sayings about or of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon Him, pbuh) shows.<sup>1</sup>

As an anthropologist with a strong social conscience, I am much inclined towards the idea of anthropology as cultural critique (Marcus & Fischer 1999). This approach, which utilises anthropological research to address social issues in the researcher's home society (Marcus & Fischer 1999), is the basis for two complementary feminist theories which together are very helpful to frame the discussion of vegan Muslims and to conceptualise 'Islamic Veganism' as a response to problems faced by individuals and communities. First of these, is the vegan-feminist critique as formulated by

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<sup>1</sup> While these readings lend themselves to promote vegan ethics, they are not universally shared by vegan Muslims, which in face of their diversity is perhaps not surprising.

Carol Adams, based on the feminist ethics of care tradition, with a focus on compassion and justice (Donovan 2006; Donovan & Adams 2007; Adams 2006, 2017). The second is the Intersectional Islam Studies approach as defined by Chaudhry (2017), which challenges the colonial legacy and male elitism in the study of Islam and Muslims.<sup>2</sup> These approaches are the theoretical basis for my argument, inform my position as a vegan Muslim, and influenced my research design and interpretation. This does not mean that all vegan Muslims are or have to be feminist or that 'Islamic Veganism' is inevitably founded on feminist theories. Yet the insights of these approaches are very helpful to frame this study.

### **a) Literature Review**

The literature that explicitly deals with veganism in Muslim contexts is sparse (but note Margoliouth 1902). Diversity in Islam and amongst Muslims however has been the subject of many anthropological studies (Geertz 1968; Bujra 1971; Gilsenan 1973, 1982; Crapanzano 1973, 1980; Eickelman 1976; Fischer & Abedi 1990; Eickelman & Piscatori 1990, 2004; Marranci 2008; Osella and Soares 2010; Bowen 2012). There has also been considerable and controversial discussion about what the anthropology of Islam is or is not (El-Zein 1977; Asad 1986; Marranci 2008; Kreinath 2012; Tapper). Different approaches show the problematic nature of defining Islam and Muslims in anthropological contexts. The questions 'what is Islam', and 'what makes one a Muslim' seem to be straight forward, but multiple conflicting answers to these questions are possible<sup>3</sup> (Varisco 2005; Marranci 2008). The term *Muslim* can be a religious, a social, or a cultural identity marker (Varisco 2005; Marranci 2008). It can denote a family heritage or personal spirituality (Marranci 2008; Ghilan 2016b). *Islam* can be a

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<sup>2</sup> Chaudhry draws on Kimberlè Crenshaw's term intersectionality and states that "Intersectional Islamic Studies considers the various intersecting layers of multiple identities that compound the privileges and oppressions that influence scholars and their scholarship" (Chaudhry 2017, 6).

<sup>3</sup> Of course there would only be one answer for both these terms for the minority of Muslims who adhere to a fundamentalist Universalist theology of Islam, as in wahhabism (for an anthropological critique of this position see El-Zein 1977).

stately sanctioned religion, a set of rules (Rahman 2017), a spiritual process or an ethical system (Ghilan 2016b). To add to the confusion differing answers can be valid at the same time depending on perspective (Varisco 2005; Marranci 2008). One anthropological approach that shares a central feature with the Intersectional Islamic studies approach is explored by Gabrielle Marranci, who focuses on the *feeling to be Muslim* (Marranci 2008, 11). This focus allows for the conceptualisation of Muslims as individuals with emotions and feelings, who negotiate their identities in various ways with countless outcomes. This approach aims at understanding “how Muslims express, form and develop their identity beyond the imposed stereotypes” (Marranci 2008, 11). In regards to Islam, Marranci says that “what Islam *is* depends on how it is interpreted” (Marranci 2008, 29, emphasis in original). Another way of saying this is that “Islam is defined by Muslims practicing and living their religion” (Chaudhry 2017). Vegan Muslims, it can be argued, are thus defining a new and distinct way of being Muslim and practicing Islam.

The concept of veganism is only recently becoming a topic for academics (see for example Harper 2012 or Wright 2015, but also Jasper 1997 and Cherry 2006). Yet, the key themes of veganism, such as animal rights and ethics, have been broadly and controversially discussed in western secular and feminist literature (Adams 1990, 1995, 2006, 2017; Bailey 2005; Cavalieri 2004, 2011; Clement 2003; Curtin 1991; DeGrazia; Donovan 1990, 1994, 2006; Frey; Garbarino 1999; Gruen 2004; Luke 1992; Kelch 1998, 1999; Kheel 1985; MacKinnon 2004; Regan 2004 [1983], 2001; Shapiro 1994; Singer 2002 [1975], 2006), as well as by Muslim scholars (Abdul Rhaman & Aidaros 2012; Al-Masri 1986, 1987, 1992, 2007; Bennison 2009; Foltz 2000, 2006; Foltz, Denny & Baharuddin (eds.) 2003; Furber 2015, 2017; Hamed 1993; Islam & Islam 2015; Izzu Dien 1991, 1992; Khalid & O’Brien 1992; Keshani 2010; Nasr 1999; Wersal 1995; Zaidi 1981).<sup>4</sup> An important part of the discussion for Muslims is

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<sup>4</sup> A position shared by many feminists and Islamic scholars is the rejection of the Cartesian worldview and pre-enlightenment thinker Francis Bacon’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature, which together form the basis for the brutal exploitation of animals and the violent destruction of the environment for human purposes.

upholding their God-given right and privilege to consume animals and their products<sup>5</sup>, while feminist animal rights advocates tend to be inclined towards abolitionism. Ethical discussions of animal welfare amongst Muslim scholars are often restricted to aspects of slaughter procedures (for example Farouk et al. 2014; Farouk et al. 2016; Nakyinsige, Man, and Sazilil 2012; Nakyinsige et al. 2013; Velarde et al. 2014; for a critique see Wood 2015). While secular feminist authors tend to be critical of anthropocentric outlooks, Muslim scholars regularly assert human uniqueness and supremacy, which can still result in a benevolent position *vis-a-vis* animals (especially Masri 1986, 2006; but also to a lesser degree Furber 2015, 2017; Islam & Islam 2015; Keshani 2010).

Only a few scholars question these assumptions. These are most notably Sarra Tlili (2012; 2015a; 2015b; 2017), Richard Foltz (2001; 2006) and Kecia Ali (2015). Foltz discusses *Animals in Islamic Traditions and Muslim Cultures* (Foltz 2006) as well as Islamic environmentalism (Foltz 2003) from a cultural historical perspective, while Islamic scholar Tlili focuses on Islam's primary sources following a contextual approach, as exemplified in her main work *Animals in the Qur'an* (Tlili 2012). Ali on the other hand offers a feminist perspective in her article *Muslims and Meat Eating – Vegetarianism, Gender, and Identity* (Ali 2015). All of them challenge anthropocentric interpretations of Islamic textual sources and therefore implicitly the interpreters, yet they are not promoting veganism. Foltz and Ali however, are in favour of vegetarianism. Foltz even speculates about *Islamic vegetarianism* (Foltz 2001, see also 2006), while Ali openly promotes it especially amongst Muslims in 'western' countries (Ali 2015). Meat-eating for Ali, and the same vegans hold true for the consumption of dairy and eggs, "is an urgent case not only due to its impact on the environment, on animals, and on the human beings who participate in its infrastructure but also (...) because of its role in shoring up patriarchy" (Ali 2015, 283). Ali, a feminist Muslim scholar, promotes the use of non-Muslim sources and frameworks, especially secular feminism (Ali 2015). Of special interest for

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<sup>5</sup> This is also the case for many Christians who believe in the notion of dominion. See Johnston (2013; 2014) for a comparison of Islamic and Christian traditions on this point.

Muslims concerned with justice is the engagement with 'secular vegetarian feminist insights' (Ali 2015, 269).

A defining aspect of feminist theory is the contributions to struggles for justice, an important part of which is the critique of patriarchal social structures and ideology (see for example, Disch & Hawkesworth [eds.] 2015). From the body of western secular feminist literature, I am specifically interested in the vegan-feminist critique formulated by Carol Adams (2006, 2017), which is based on the feminist care tradition (Donovan 2006; Donovan & Adams 2007; Adams 2006, 2017). From the broad field of Islamic feminism I am inspired by the Intersectional Islamic studies approach as defined by Chaudhry (2017). Adams exposes and rejects speciesism and anthropocentrism as foundational aspects of patriarchy, which she describes as a hierarchical social order based on oppression and domination (Adams 1990, 2006, 2017), while Chaudhry describes how this order produces studies of Islam and Muslims tainted by ideas of white male or Muslim male supremacies (Chaudhry 2017). Chaudhry traces these approaches, which are characterized by a conservative, rigid and universalist interpretation of Islam, to the impact of imperialism/colonialism, like Geertz before her (Geertz 1968) albeit in a more critical manner, and offers an alternative approach to Islam studies (Chaudhry 2017), while Adams establishes the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of animals in patriarchal culture in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990; see also 2017). Adams consequently holds that a feminist critique of patriarchy must include a critique of animal oppression or else be incomplete (Adams 1990; Adams 2017), an argument which escapes Chaudhry. Yet Intersectional Islamic studies is very promising as it offers a way to produce knowledge which is not limited by patriarchal ideologies, by treating the Qur'an as a 'meaning-generating text' and Islam as well as its laws as dynamic (Chaudhry 2017, 30), while allowing ordinary Muslims to be seen as qualified and appropriate spokespersons for the faith (Chaudhry 2017). In order to be useful to issues of justice in human-nonhuman relationships this approach needs to be amended by including the insights of the

vegan-feminist critique with its aims to de-objectify animals and re-conceptualise the human-nonhuman relationship on a basis of caring consideration, rather than brutal exploitation (Adams 1990; Adams 2017; also Donovan and Adams 2007, eds.; Armstrong and Botzler 2003).

The connection between Islam and veganism is however not entirely unexplored. Discussions are merely taking place outside of academia. A look at social media shows that some vegan Muslims are very outspoken about their beliefs, experiences and ideas, and further that a rich debate as to how Islam and veganism go together is well on the way. This is manifest in various Facebook groups, such as *Vegan Muslim Community*, *Muslim Vegans*, *Raw Vegan Muslims*, *Muslim Vegans for a Healthy World*, *Animal Rights and Animal Welfare in Islam*, or *Environment and Animals Rights in Islam*, Facebook pages such as *The Veiled Vegan*, *Vegan Muslim*, *The Vegan Muslim*, *Vegan Muslim Initiative* and associated blogs, Twitter accounts and Instagram stories. Vegan Muslims, and individuals interested in veganism and/or Islam, are sharing in these forums personal stories, questions, and opinions, recipes, information about the health aspects of veganism, as well as concerns about the food industry. They connect, give and receive support on their journeys as vegan Muslims. These accounts are usually based on a mix of individual experience, common sense, and engagement with Islamic texts, with the majority to be found somewhere in the middle of a spectrum between no engagement and a scholarly scriptural approach.

An example for a discussion of primary Islamic sources from a vegan perspective can be found on the blog of Mohamed Ghilan, a Canadian based Islamic scholar and Neuroscientist who teaches for the Al-Madina Institute. In his articles *The Halal Bubble and the Sunnah Imperative to Go Vegan* (Ghilan 2016a) and the follow up discussion *Would the Prophet Muhammad be Vegan Today?* (Ghilan 2016b). Ghilan argues convincingly that veganism is not only compatible with Islam, but that in fact it should be a recommended way of life for Muslims in this day and age when eating animals and animal products is not necessary for survival (Ghilan 2016a; Ghilan 2016b). Crucial to his arguments is

his vision of Islam “not simply as a religion, but also as an ethical system derived from the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah*, to examine our place and behaviour in the world, as we exist in it today” (Ghilan 2016b, paragraph 8). Ghilan delivers an in-depth, critical discussion of several hadith pertaining to morals in general and human-nonhuman relationships specifically. He concludes, like many other vegan Muslims, that the overwhelming majority of animal products consumed by Muslims must be considered as *haram* (unlawful) due to the disturbing cruelty inherent in the methods of production, their negative effects on human health and the detrimental impact on the environment (Ghilan 2015a; Ghilan 2015b; see also: Hakim 2017a; Hakim 2017c; Hakim 2017f; Hakim 2018;).

## **b) Methodology**

In this dissertation I have employed a parallel mixed methodology. Methods include semi-structured interviews, a self-selected survey, participant observation and library-based study.<sup>6</sup> Further I have chosen to discuss my own positionality by giving a short auto-ethnographic account of my conversion to Islam and the parallel adoption of a vegan lifestyle. The recruitment process for the interviews involved a personal conversation with a vegan Muslim who I had met in 2017 at an event of the Muslim University Students Association at the University of Otago, and two posts in the closed Facebook group *Vegan Muslim Community* (which also advertised the survey). After a communication with the administrators of the group they decided to make a post on my behalf, which gave information about aims and purpose of this study and linked to the relevant documents uploaded to the group’s page. Their post was pinned<sup>7</sup> in the group for about four weeks before it was removed again. About a month after this I made a second post to the group myself.

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<sup>6</sup> The research for this dissertation was approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee on 8 February 2018 (reference number 18/005).

<sup>7</sup> A ‘pinned post’ in a Facebook group appears always at the top of the discussion forum. The number of such posts is to my knowledge not restricted. Administrators usually use this function to provide members with information about the group as well as outline a code of conduct.

The posts, which had invited members to contact me on Facebook, generated modest interest. Eight members of the group were interested. However only two of them went ahead, and one of them later withdrew their consent. I was thus left with two interviews (one with a member of the *Vegan Muslim Community* plus the one conducted with my contact at the University of Otago) and decided to draw additional information from statements and interviews from publicly active and self-identified vegan Muslims, instead of advertising my study again or to approach another group. One of the interviews was conducted in person in a study room on the University of Otago campus, while the other was conducted via the telecommunication software *Skype*. The conversations were guided by a set of questions, which I had shared beforehand with my conversation partner. The face-to-face interview was recorded with a hand recorder, the other was recorded with *MP3 skype recorder*, a free software designed to record Skype conversations. I transcribed both of the recordings and coded the transcripts with the software *NVIVO* on a departmental computer in order to better identify themes.

I further engaged in participant observation of an online community, which was also the site of a survey. The site of this observation was the Facebook group *Vegan Muslim community*, which was founded in spring 2015 by Elysia Ward<sup>8</sup> and has to date just over 4500 members. Prior to my research I had already been a member of this group for about one year. While I was only casually visiting the group to begin with (reading posts approximately once a week on average), my engagement and observation increased significantly upon commencing research for this dissertation (checking on group activities almost daily and reading many of the posts and discussions). The *Vegan Muslim Community* is a closed group, which means members need to be approved by the administrators. The group is decidedly vegan<sup>9</sup> and accepts individuals of all faiths (including secular

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<sup>8</sup> See Barrie (2018) for a short interview with Eylisa Ward.

<sup>9</sup> Veganism here is defined as an ethical stance opposed to all forms of animal exploitation, distinct from vegetarianism which accepts exploitation of animals for products, such as milk, eggs, honey, wool, silk, and

minded Facebook users) who are interested in learning about Islam and Veganism. The closed status of the group also makes it unethical to cite freely from posts and conversations shared in the group. It may be said however, without infringing on anybody's right to privacy that the group functions as a relatively safe place to explore veganism as a Muslim or to learn about Islam as a vegan<sup>10</sup>. Members share recipes, stories, questions, hopes and struggles in a safe space. The group connects vegan Muslims from a great variety of countries and backgrounds.

I conducted a survey in the *Vegan Muslim community* to circumvent ethical problems arising out of the closed status of the group. The survey was designed online on the homepage *surveymonkey.com*, which provides a helpful introduction to and instructions for designing, conducting, and analyzing online surveys. To utilize the service of this homepage I created a free account. On the basis of the given information I designed a survey with nine questions, covering attitudes towards veganism as well as religious characteristics of survey participants. The recruitment process for the survey was identical to and occurred simultaneous to the process described above for the interviews. Interested members of the group could follow a link to the survey. The survey type is thus self-selected and restricted. A total number 46 participants completed the survey, which aided in the decision to be satisfied with only two interviews. It is important to note that the survey is not employed to make representative claims about the vegan Muslim population of the chosen group, or even the general population of vegan Muslims, as a sociological study might attempt. Rather I have used the survey as an interpretive tool to present additional voices from Muslims with a strong interest in veganism. The download of the data was not possible with the free account, which is why I

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leather. There is also a difference between being vegan and following a plant-based diet, since the latter is not necessarily grounded in the ethical conviction to avoid harm to others.

<sup>10</sup> Some anti-vegan Facebook users do sometimes find their way into the group and try to dissuade members of ethical veganism. The administrators are very lenient towards these individuals and only remove them or their posts from the group if they are disrespectful or insulting (in other words, if they engage in trolling).

transcribed the results into a *Microsoft Word* document. I created five diagrams with *Microsoft Excel* to visualize the answers of some questions in this dissertation.

### **c) Chapter outline**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. *Chapter 1: Islam and Veganism* examines how veganism and Islam are reconciled. A first section will discuss a video of vegan Muslim YouTuber Nagad (2016), analysing her core statements with Richard Foltz (2001, 2006). The subsequent section will discuss aspects of the argument for a non-anthropocentric interpretation of the Qur'an presented by Sarra Tlili in *Animals in the Qur'an* (2012). The third section focuses on the notion *khalifa*, which is important in defining the status of humans *vis-a-vis* other animals from an Islamic perspective.

*Chapter 2: Becoming and Being a Vegan Muslim* describes aspects my own conversion story to Islam and veganism. I will use this short auto-ethnographic component in a reflexive manner to expose my own bias and positionality, with the aim to make my argument and reasoning more accessible to the reader. My experience as vegan Muslim not only influenced the research design and interpretation, it made this work conceivable in the first instance.

*Chapter 3 Vegan Muslims* introduces research participants who identify as both Muslim and Vegan. The first section outlines the online advocacy work of some vegan Muslims. The following section presents data gained from a restricted, self-selected survey in the Facebook group *Vegan Muslim Community*. The survey results show the variety amongst vegan Muslims attitudes towards religion and spirituality, and suggest that vegan Muslims consider a variety of reasons as motivation for their adoption of veganism, with animal rights being the most favoured reason for participants. Further, Muslims of diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds embrace Veganism. While certain groups seem to be overrepresented in the results this could be due to the selection biases. The chapter concludes with a short speculation about vegan Muslim identities.

The concluding *Chapter 4: Towards 'Islamic Veganism'* discusses the potential and the usefulness of shari'a to restrain the violent exploitation and cruel oppression of animals at the hand of humans. I will argue with Tlili (2015) and Musa Furber (2015; 2017) that Islamic texts on human-nonhuman relationships render industrial animal agriculture untenable for Muslims. Strict application of rulings developed by classical jurists and contextualised and applied by contemporary scholars of Islam such as Furber (2015; 2017) bears the potential to drastically reduce the number of animals bred, raised and killed for human consumption and better the situation of those that are still kept. The shari'a can thus indeed be used to advance the cause of veganism, in basing the relations between humans and nonhumans on the ideal of justice. A strict application of shari'a will radically alter consumption patterns of Muslims and leave plant-based food as the only permissible diet for a considerable percentage. The legal approach however needs to be completed by surrender to and full appreciation of the ethics underlying the rules, such as justice, compassion and kindness, to facilitate the complete elimination of animal products from our diet as proposed by 'Islamic Veganism'.

## Chapter 2: Islam and Veganism

“Islamic civilization has been markedly attentive to the well-being of animals, acknowledging their interests and extending legal rights and protection to a large number of species” (Tlili 2012, 3).

Both Veganism and Islam offer a moral and ethical framework through which to navigate a diverse and fragmented world threatened in profound ways. A crisis faced by all humanity is climate change, with its associated causes and symptoms such as drought and famine, deforestation and desertification, acidification of oceans, and the pollution of air, soil and waterways. In the face of these issues, climate change has been described as the most pressing issue on a global level, as it is threatening the survival of our and potentially any species on the planet (Ripple et al 2017). Already in 1992 a warning to humanity was issued by the ‘Union of Concerned Scientists’ (signed by more than 1700 leading scientists) in which the fear was expressed “that humanity is pushing the Earths eco-systems beyond the capacities to support the web of life” (Ripple et al 2017, 1026).<sup>11</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this warning Ripple et al reviewed the situation and gave a ‘second notice’ to the warning, this time with 15,364 signatories from various fields and backgrounds (Ripple et al 2017). They state that humanity has not only failed to make progress in solving the foreseen problems, but that the situation has deteriorated in all but one issue (Ripple et al 2017). “Especially troubling” they state, “is the current trajectory of potentially catastrophic climate change due to rising GHGs [greenhouse gases, authors note] from burning fossil fuels (Hansen et al. 2013), deforestation (Keenan et al. 2015), and agricultural production— particularly from farming ruminants for meat consumption” (Ripple et al 2017, 1026). Ripple *et al* thus warn that it is “time to re-examine and change our individual behaviors, including limiting our own reproduction (ideally to replacement

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<sup>11</sup> The danger of this scenario is adequately described as already in motion by Ceballos, Ehrlich and Dirzo (2017), who describe the contemporary observable biodiversity loss as the ‘sixth mass-extinction’.

level at most) and drastically diminishing our *per capita* consumption of fossil fuels, meat, and other resources” (Ripple et al 2017, 1026).

While the call of these scientists to reduce meat consumption is an encouragement for animal rights activists and potentially a good message for animals, it is telling that domesticated animals do not feature in their own right in the message. Their lives and their suffering are of no direct concern, the only reason why we should raise, kill and eat fewer animals is the environmental destruction associated with intensive agriculture. Central to this argument is thus neither a feeling of compassion for animals, nor the realisation of the injustice done to them. At the heart of this argument is instead the survival of the human species in a sustainable and enjoyable environment. Unnoticed goes the fact that anthropocentrism, as manifest in the above argument, is the ideological foundation for environmental destruction and the oppression and exploitation so characteristic for contemporary human-nonhuman relationships.

This lack of insight into deeper causes of the problems is only partially shared by contemporary Muslim environmentalists, many of which recognise and reject the Cartesian dichotomy and the following de-sanctification of nature and objectification of living beings prevalent in western science as the source of the current environmental crisis. However, all but a few fail to translate this realisation into awareness of the need to fundamentally change human-nonhuman relationships. This chapter is an attempt to challenge anthropocentric interpretations of the Qur’an, which are used by Muslims to defend and justify meat-eating. Part of this challenge will be an analysis of the changing meaning of the term *khalifa*. Before that however, the issue of reconciling Islam and Veganism needs to be addressed.

## a) Reconciling Islam and Veganism

Veganism is defined by The Vegan Society as “a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose” (The Vegan Society 2018). As pointed out by Kadry (2016) on [www.themuslimvibe.com](http://www.themuslimvibe.com)<sup>12</sup> an accusation that some Muslim vegans are confronted with is that by refusing to consume meat and animal products they are making *haram* (impermissible) what God made *halal* (permissible), which is explicitly prohibited by Qur’anic injunction. Despite the “compelling arguments made that adopting a vegan, vegetarian, or semi-vegetarian diet is more in accordance with the prophetic tradition and Islamic principles than the current daily meat-eating culture amongst many Muslim communities” (Kadry 2016; see also Ghilan 2015a, 2015b), veganism can thus be perceived as un-Islamic . This was also experienced by Dunedin-based vegan Muslim Amal who, like other vegan Muslims, sometimes feels the need to address the fundamental question of whether it is even permissible to be vegan to Muslims who think she has ‘left Islam’ because of her choosing a different lifestyle (Amal 2018: Interview). Amal further relates that there is at times a climate of fear-mongering created by those who feel threatened by the propositions of veganism (Amal 2018: Interview). Farman from Pakistan relates similar experiences when he tells of the ridicule he endures by colleagues, family and friends for his choice to go vegan and his need to justify his choice with advice from his doctor, while his veganism is actually based on compassion towards animals (Farman 2018: Interview).

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<sup>12</sup> This homepage is a grassroots media platform aiming “to inspire, inform & empower millennial Muslims to build a strong and united Muslim identity, through ethical and engaging Islamic content” (The Muslim Vibe 2014).

The challenge of reconciling Islam and veganism is also dealt with by the young female cosmopolitan YouTuber Nagad in one of her videos.<sup>13</sup> While not all of her videos deal directly with questions concerning veganism and Islam, her second most popular video with over 20,000 views (21,472) bears the title *MUSLIMS CANT BE VEGAN* (Nagad 2016). To back her claim that the opposite is true she references the *fatwas* (legal opinions) of scholars of Islam Hamza Yusuf, who states that the Prophet Muhammad was not a meat-eater as we understand it today, backed up by a saying of the third Sunni caliph 'Umar, which roughly translates to: 'beware of meat; in it is an addiction like the addiction of wine' (Nagad 2016, 1:30), and Mufti Ebrahim Desai, who says that eating meat is not obligatory (Nagad 2016, 2:03). In this way Nagad rejects the idea that veganism is haram and upholds that just because eating meat is permissible, it does not mean that it has to be done.

This reasoning leads to the declaration of her veganism as a personal choice which "has nothing to do with my religion" (Nagad 2016, 2:41). She further says that: "I am not looking at veganism to get closer to Allah" (Nagad 2016, 2:48), meaning that she does not think that she has a better connection with God through her adoption and practicing of veganism. Nagad does not directly challenge the habit of eating animals in general as some ethical vegans would do. Her position is based on a Quranic verse which she quotes as: "*And cattle has he created for you, numerous benefits you derive, and of their meat you eat*"<sup>14</sup> (Nagad 2016, 3:15). This verse is likely to be familiar to every vegan Muslim who had a conversation with a convinced meat-eating Muslim, as it is often quoted as the unsurmountable evidence that eating meat is sanctioned in the Qur'an and therefore approved

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<sup>13</sup> Another YouTuber who deals with this issue is Lujayn Hawari in her video *Can a Muslim be vegetarian or vegan*, which was uploaded on 20 November 2017 and has to date 1,629 views, 61 likes, 6 dislikes. Hawari comes to the conclusion, similar to Nagad, that someone can very well be vegan or vegetarian as a Muslim, and additionally highlights reasons for and benefits of a vegan diet and lifestyle. Mohammad Ghilan's videos on the topic (*MGP#13: The #Halal Bubble and the #Sunnah Imperative to Go #Vegan* uploaded on 18 July 2016, 2,059 views, 60 likes, 4 dislikes, and *MGP#14: Would the #Prophet Muhammad Be #Vegan Today?* uploaded on 24 July 2016, 3,056 views, 112 likes, 3 dislikes) go a step further and recommend a vegan diet as more appropriate in this day and age for any Muslim who can afford to do so. Nada makes a similar conclusion, and relates a personal account of the difficulties involved in negotiating a vegan lifestyle choice to a non-vegan Muslim family in Cairo on her blog [www.onearabvegan.com](http://www.onearabvegan.com). See also Kadry (2016) and Bakar (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Surah al-Nahl, verse 5.

by God. For Nagad this is the reason why “Veganism and Islam might clash” (Nagad 2016, 3:35), since “ethical vegans believe that animals aren’t our slaves and that they are not here on this planet for us” (Nagad 2016, 3:40). Despite the seeming contradiction, Nagad does consider herself an ethical vegan while upholding the anthropocentric idea that cattle were “put on the planet for humans” (Nagad 2016, 4:00). As a consequence of this position Nagad thinks that Muslims would be more open to accept and respond to environmental reasons for the adoption of a vegan diet. “Ethical arguments for reducing the consumption of meat and dairy just won’t work for Muslims” (Nagad 2016, 6:43)<sup>15</sup>.

Nagad’s stance is perfectly in line with the scholarly opinions cited on [www.AnimalsInIslam.com](http://www.AnimalsInIslam.com), a homepage run by the animal rights advocacy organization PeTA. While all of the referenced fatwas uphold that it is permissible to consume meat, they also declare vegetarianism as permissible in Islam (PETA 2018). There are however significant differences in the scholars’ attitude towards it. US-based Hamza Yusuf, who could perhaps be described from his statements as a reducitarian<sup>16</sup>, upholds that early Muslims, following the example of their Prophet, were semi-vegetarians, that only wealthy Muslims would eat meat regularly and that poorer Muslims would not eat meat except during *Eid al-Adha* (PETA 2018). Muhammad Siddiqi on the other hand says that Muslims recognise animal rights, but declares that Muslims are not vegetarians, while portraying eating meat as an entitlement (PETA 2018). Others stress that vegetarians should not think that eating meat is generally prohibited or that they are better Muslims and/or closer to God for being vegetarian (PETA 2018). Neither shall abstaining from meat be seen as an act of worship (PETA

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<sup>15</sup> Deviating from this opinion, the findings of the survey presented in chapter 3 suggest that animal rights do play a large role for some English speaking vegan Muslims, in fact it was the single most cited reason by participants of the survey to the question why they adopted veganism. However, due to the selection bias I cannot claim this to be true for the general population of Muslims. The role of ethics in the recognition and promotion of animal rights however cannot be ruled out *per se*.

<sup>16</sup> The reducitarian movement is concerned with drastically reducing, as the name suggests, the amount of animals consumed by humans. While upholding the right to eat animals and animal products in principle, this movement and their adherents are natural allies of animal rights activists who rally against contemporary farming practices and the high amount of animal fat in the human diet. It seems also like a go-to option for many Muslims who realise the incompatibility of current levels of meat consumption and the ill-treatment of animals with Islamic teachings, but perceive veganism as too radical.

2018). While granting vegan Muslims the right to exist, the scholars remain silent about the important issues raised by them, with the notable exception of Hamza Yusuf, who preaches a reduction of meat consumption in light of the connection between contemporary animal agriculture and environmental destruction (PETA 2018; Blue Peace 2015).

Nagad implicitly considers three general positions of Muslims towards veganism. These are first, that veganism and Islam are mutually exclusive, meaning that being vegan is impermissible for Muslims. The second position, shared by Farman, Nagad and the scholars she quotes, is that Veganism and Islam are operating on different levels, that is, being vegan as a Muslim is permissible on personal basis for other than religious reasons. And thirdly, veganism and Islam share a common ground, to the effect that a synthesis is not only possible but even desirable, a position first rejected by her as she says that her veganism does not bring her closer to God, but then hinted at in her statement about the duty to inform oneself about environmental issues of animal agriculture and her self-identification as an ethical vegan. Foltz, who has engaged with the similar question whether vegetarianism is un-Islamic, rejects like Nagad the first position, showing that this argument, as held for example by Islamic environmentalist Izzi Dien (1991, 1992), is based on the equation of a scriptural permission to eat animals with the command to do so. The idea that refusing to eat meat equals disobedience to God since God had allowed humans to eat meat is thus unsound (Foltz 2001), as also stated by Nagad (2016). As narrated by Amal this position can further contain the argument that refusing to eat animals signals ingratitude for the gifts of God bestowed on humanity (Amal 2018: Interview), an act which can certainly not be described as Islamic. Perhaps the most prominent Islamic scholar holding the second position is Zakir Naik, who states that pure vegetarianism is

permissible on personal level, but unreasonable since the Qur'an allows meat consumption and since plants are alive and feel pain too (Dr Zakir Naik 2014).<sup>17</sup>

A shared underlying assumption of these arguments is that animals are created for the benefit of humanity, as expressed in the Quranic verse quoted by Nagad. As this anthropocentric position is grounded in scripture, its refutation must follow suit and engage with Islam's primary literature (Foltz 2001). Foltz does exactly that and turns to the Quran and the hadith, which "strongly enjoin Muslims to treat animals with compassion and not to abuse them" (Foltz 2001, 43). He not only argues that vegetarianism is indeed permissible but that the pervasive cultural habit of meat-eating goes against two core themes of the Quran, namely compassion and social justice, citing issues such as animal abuse, environmental destruction and human malnutrition (Foltz 2001). He further criticises the failure of environmentalist Muslim authors to recognize the connections between animal agriculture and environmental degradation (2001), a failure which he later ascribes to ignorance of the destructive impact of animal agriculture on the environment (2014). Foltz ultimately calls for a rethinking of the habit of meat-eating, saying that "a vegetarian lifestyle may in fact be preferable for Muslims (Foltz 2001, 54)". It is this expression of the third position that forms the ground for the endorsement of ethical veganism amongst Muslims. Unfortunately however, Foltz's

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<sup>17</sup> A quick analysis of Naik's recorded mass lecture is quite revealing of a stance based on dogma rather than critical thinking. While vegetarianism is acceptable for Muslims, it is deemed irrational and is ultimately delegitimised by Naik, who first quotes from the Quran to remind the audience of the permissibility of eating animals and then uses 'logic' to advance his position. In this endeavor, he makes reference to the God-given human physiology, quoting the canine teeth and the ability of the human digestive system to digest animal flesh, which allow humans to consume animal flesh, all the medicinal research that links various cancers and heart diseases to diets high in animal fats notwithstanding. He then turns to 'plant rights activism' in order to further defend meat-eating, while not realising or admitting that the number of plants used to raise animals for consumption is a multiple compared to the plants eaten by vegans, which exposes his plants-have-feelings-too position as a strawman argument. The conversion of plant protein to animal protein is very resource intensive and expensive, and can be described as a nutrient destruction scheme. That this wasting of resources is against Islamic principles is of course also not mentioned by scholars like Zakir Naik, who are bound to uphold the status quo of human supremacy no matter the cost. Other scholars and teachers who express a similar view on YouTube are Saad Tasleem (AlMaghrib Institute 2017) and Sheikh Assim Al Hakeem (Assimalhakeem 2018).

article itself lacks any reference to veganism. The argument did not extend to include the dairy and egg industry despite the fact that this reasoning is applicable there too.<sup>18</sup>

Foltz continues his discussion from 2001 and explores the idea of an *Islamic Vegetarianism* in his inspiring book *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (2006). His exploration there starts with the assertion that the practice of meat-eating amongst Muslims is largely an unquestioned fact of nature as it is sanctioned by religious tradition (Foltz 2006). Foltz however argues that the scriptural sanctioning of meat-eating should be seen a sign of the practicability approach found in the Qur'an and not as an end in itself (Foltz 2006). The Qur'an approves of meat-eating only since desert dwelling nomadic Arabs could face starvation in extreme conditions on a purely vegetarian diet (Foltz 2006). In face of the various restrictions it can in fact be said that the practice was tolerated rather than endorsed (Foltz 2006). Qur'anic restrictions have been embodied by the practice of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors. Classical jurists have elaborated the restrictions in their rulings on human-nonhuman relationships. The environmental and ethical issues however that arose due to the abandoning of these rulings are pressing today, but are themselves neglected by contemporary scholars (Foltz 2006). The failure of contemporary Islamic scholars to engage with modern-day issues in human-animal and more general human-nature relations is evident in the contemporary fatwas mentioned above<sup>19</sup>, which focus on the potential wrongdoings of vegans/vegetarians instead of the issues raised and addressed by them.

The neglected problems next to the unacceptable treatment of animals include environmental destruction, social justice, health issues connected with industrial agriculture and the consumption of animal fats (Foltz 2006). Foltz describes the disparity between the focus on social

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<sup>18</sup> For a description of the abuse involved in the dairy and egg industries see Stepaniak (2000). For the environmental impact of dairy farming see the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (2006) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) (2017).

<sup>19</sup> With the exemption of Hamza Yusuf, whose position is shortly described above, and Musa Furber, whose work will be cited in chapter 4.

justice issues evident in the Prophet Muhammad’s life and mission with the contemporary situation of the world (Foltz 2006). He notes that not only is meat-eating still a privilege, but that eating itself is not taken for granted. More than a billion people suffer from chronic hunger and malnutrition while “more than half of all land under cultivation is given over to crops destined for livestock consumption” (Foltz 2006, 120). Foltz thus agrees with Peter Singer (2002) that animal agriculture intensifies instead of solves the hunger crises (Foltz 2006), a position confirmed by the report of Ripple et al (2017). He further suggests that “for the vast majority of Muslims the eating of meat is not only unnecessary but is also directly responsible for causing grave ecological and social harm, as well as being less healthful than a balanced vegetarian regime” (Foltz 2006, 121).<sup>20</sup> If this is the case, then the question of today should be ‘*Is contemporary animal agriculture un-Islamic?*’ While this question is addressed in varying degrees by vegan Muslims it is ignored or dismissed by Islamic authorities who would be in the position to issue fatwas and by doing so influence the decision of millions of humans.

## **b) Challenging anthropocentrism in Islam with Sarra Tlili**

Western veganism rejects speciesism, anthropocentrism and human supremacy (Stepaniak 2000). Instead of seeing animals as mere objects, resources, food, or property a vegan will see a living breathing, feeling, and thinking being, pursuing its own interests and endowed with rights (Stepaniak 2000). Vegans regard the violent oppression and cruel exploitation of other animals as matters of injustice that need to be addressed and oppose the destruction of the natural environments for the sake of satisfying unnecessary human wants (Stepaniak 2000). As the example of Nagad shows, vegan Muslims do not necessarily share the strict rejection of anthropocentrism. Yet, those who do can find support and justification for this challenge in theological considerations, as Tlili shows (2015). Her in

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<sup>20</sup> As mentioned this position is prominently endorsed by Ripple et al (2017), but also by the FAO (2006) and the WWF (2017) amongst others. See Bouvard *et al* (2015) from the International Agency for Research on Cancer for a discussion of health risks related to meat consumption.

depth contextual discussion<sup>21</sup> of the animal question challenges human supremacy and speciesism and thus lends itself as a philosophical basis for the formulation of ‘Islamic Veganism’, although she herself does not endorse the total abstention from animal products (Sarrah Tlili, email to author, 22 June 2018). Tlili however shows that a non-anthropocentric interpretation is not only possible, but more plausible (Tlili 2012, 8).

Tlili’s major work, *Animals and the Qur’an* (2012), is focused entirely on Islamic tradition and offers great detail and insight. In her interpretation of the Qur’an she vehemently rejects any kind of anthropocentrism, implicitly including a benevolent one, and presents to the reader an eco-centric/theocentric reading instead (Tlili 2012). She argues that the status of created beings is dependent on spirituality instead of rationality and holds that “a non-anthropocentric reading of the Qur’an is not only warranted, but also much needed” (Tlili 2012, x), as “placing humans above the natural world may lead (and has led) to their deification” (Tlili 2012, x), with devastating consequences for humans, other animals and the environment. An anthropocentric worldview allows for human despotism and has greatly contributed to, and possibly even triggered the contemporary ecological crisis (Tlili 2012; see also FAO 2006, Ripple et al 2017, and WWF 2017). Tlili argues further that the anthropocentric assumption of “divine favoritism” goes against the Qur’anic notion of God’s justice (Tlili 2012, xi). The aim of her book is however “not to devalue humans”, but “to place them amidst a natural order God seems to value greatly” (Tlili 2012, xi). Her book thus offers a great examination of status and nature of animals in the Qur’an, reinforced by engagement with a number of well-known classical exegetes (Tlili 2012).

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<sup>21</sup> See Abdulaah Saeed (2006) for an explication of the contextual approach to the interpretation of the Qur’an, with a focus on its ethico-legal content. The distinctive feature of this approach is its flexibility which stems from “taking into consideration both the socio-historical context of the Qur’an at the time of revelation in the first/seventh century and the contemporary concerns and needs of Muslims today”(Saeed 2006, 1), as opposed to the more rigid textualist position, proponents of which “argue for a strict following of the text and adopt a literalistic approach to the text” (Saeed 2006, 3).

The majority of Muslims, like followers of other world religions<sup>22</sup>, view nonhuman animals as inferior to humans, and further regard this status difference as God's will (Tlili 2012). Such a worldview is however not "supported by a close reading of the Qur'an" (Tlili 2012, 3). Why then are anthropocentric interpretations so dominant? Tlili identifies three factors that obscure non-anthropocentric readings (Tlili 2012). The first of these factors is the existence of passages, such as the one cited by Nagad, that "seem to suggest the inferiority of other animals to humans" (Tlili 2012, 8). The second factor is the anthropocentric worldview of interpreters, which is "projected on to the Qur'an" (Tlili 2012, 8). Related to these barriers is the fact that nonhuman animals as the victims of such projection are not able to contest such views themselves (Tlili 2012, 9). Tlili then acknowledges that the Qur'an indeed displays a focus on humans, but upholds that "this interest is not necessarily an indication either of a privileged status or of a particular divine preference for humans" (Tlili 2012, 9). Rather the Qur'anic text "discusses its addressees extensively because its main goal is to convey a message of special relevance to them" (Tlili 2012, 9). Tlili refutes the argument "that the fact that humans have been chosen as God's addressees can in itself be regarded as a sign of special favour" and states that this is an "unsustainable leap", as humans are frequently portrayed as failing "to comply with divine injunctions and recommendations" (Tlili 2012, 11). One of these injunctions is to avoid corruption on earth, generally interpreted as preserving the integrity of earth's natural ecosystems, a task humanity is collectively failing. In fact, the necessity to address humans in such a way would more logically imply a low status of humans in regards to their *taqwa* – God-consciousness – and morality (Tlili 2012).

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<sup>22</sup> A comparison of the status of animals and human attitudes towards them in different religious traditions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but see for example Tlili (2015), as well as Gross (2014), Hobgood-Oster (2008), Kemmerer (2011), Perlo (2009), and Randall (2014). See Szűcs et al (2012), Waldau and Kimberley (2009) for descriptions and comparisons of major religious traditions on these and related points.

### c) The changing meaning of *khalifa*

*And (mention, O Muhammad), when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority [khalifa, authors note].' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?' God said, 'Indeed, I know that which you do not know.'*

- The Holy Quran, Surah al Baqara, verse 30, Sahih International Translation<sup>23</sup>

Tlili delivers an in depth discussion of Qur'anic themes which have been interpreted as indications or scriptural proof of nonhuman animals' inferior status *vis-à-vis* humans (2012). She engages critically with Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsir*) of the classical exegetes al-Tabari (d. 310/923), al-Razi (d. 606/1210), al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273), and ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373)<sup>24</sup> and comes to very different conclusion than these scholars, who are still held in high prestige and whose opinions are influential to this day due to the prevailing traditionalism and orthodoxy in institutions of Islamic education. Her critical examination of these concepts is thus not only a challenge to anthropocentrism in general, but also a challenge towards male religious authorities of past and present, who either wilfully endorsed anthropocentrism or were blinded by their own anthropocentric bias. In a vein similar to Chaudhry's intersectional critique of power relations in Islamic studies (2017), Tlili elaborates on the fact that the exegetes were more or less entangled with political powers and states that "it is to be expected that the discourse used to legitimize and validate the role of the caliphs by entrenching them in the divine scripture was gradually incorporated in various Islamic writings, particularly Qur'anic commentaries"

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<sup>23</sup> I have taken the unorthodox freedom to deviate from the translation in one point, as I render Allah as God instead of leaving the word untranslated. Other translations of above verse read *khalifa* as 'generations after generations' (Muhsin Khan), 'successive human authority' (Dr. Mustafa Khattab), 'deputy' (Mufti Taqi Usmani), 'vicegerent' (Abul Ala Maududi; Yusuf Ali), 'successor' (Dr. Ghali), 'viceroy' (Pickthall). All available at [www.quran.com](http://www.quran.com), last accessed 30/08/2018.

<sup>24</sup> See al-Qadi (1990) for a discussion of earlier exegetes who lived and worked "at a time when each commentator was still struggling independently to understand the meanings of the revealed text (...)" (Al-Qadi 1990:395). Al-Qadi's work is cited by Tlili and has influenced her interpretation and conclusion.

(Tlili 2012, 118). With the individualisation of politics as well as the urge to conquer an objectified nature in modern times and the influence of modernity on Islamic scholars (Taji-Farouki 2004), it is thus not surprising that the term used to legitimize the position of an absolute ruler is now used to declare the exalted status of humanity on earth, which serves as justification for exploitation and destruction.

Of the concepts discussed by Tlili (2012), I focus here on *khalifa*, which has a “key function in defining the rank of man [sic] in Islamic theology” (Steppat 1989, 164). The term is generally taken by contemporary Muslims to denote humans’ vice-regency or guardianship on the Earth and often held up by meat-eating Muslims in conversations with vegans to convince them of the rightfulness of their actions. Khalifa thus works in a similar way to the Judeo-Christian notion of dominion<sup>25</sup>, and is used to justify human supremacy (Tlili 2012). However, Tlili holds that “it is debatable whether the ideas of authority and representation are intended at all in this concept and indeed whether this is an ‘appointment’ meant to confer on the supposed appointee any special status” (Tlili 2012, 116; see also al-Qadi 1990). An investigation into the history of the word supports this understanding. Tlili cites a late 19<sup>th</sup> century lexicon of Arabic (compiled by Edward Lane) which defines the term *khalifa* merely as “He came after, followed, succeeded, or remained after another, or another that had perished or died” (Lane in Tlili 2012, 116). This definition matches the story related by early exegetes that humans are the temporal successors of a population of spiritual beings (*jinn*) on the earth (Tlili 2015, 117; see also al-Qadi 1990), but exegetes accept and promote the idea of vice regency, which as Tlili states “is hardly surprising considering that most of them were influenced by the political reality of *khilafa*” (Tlili 2012, 118).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> An adequate description of differences and similarities is not possible here, but see Johnston (2010; and 2014) for a progressive yet anthropocentric comparison of Islamic and Christian ideas of *khalifa* and dominion as ‘trusteeship’.

<sup>26</sup> *Khalif rasul Allah*, it must be noted, was the title of successors of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the leader of the community. Under the Umayyad khalifs however, the usage of the word changed to *khalifat Allah*

The meaning of the term changed considerably as early as in the era of the Umayyad caliphs (661-750) (al-Qadi 1990; Tlili 2012). This change is observed by Steppat too, who engaged with works of different Islamic epochs in his analyses of the concept *khalifa* (Steppat 1989). The first of these is by al-Tabari who, according to Steppat, “sticks to his understanding of khalifa as the succession of generations” (Steppat 1989, 165). A change has occurred in Al-Baydawi, who, living 400 years later, gives “deputy as well as successor as the meaning of *khalifa*” (Steppat 1989, 165). Authority here is however limited to the holder of the office of khalifa (Steppat 1989). This understanding is shared by exegetes Qurtubi and Razi, as Tlili notes (Tlili 2012). Ghazzali also understands khalifa as God’s deputy, albeit restricted to the prophets (Steppat 1989, 166). Steppat then cites modern Muslim reformers and revivalists such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1967), and al-Mawdudi (d. 1979), who broaden the meaning considerably (Steppat 1989). An extreme example of this can be found in Qutb’s interpretation of above mentioned verse (Surah al-Baqara verse 30), about which he says that “the Supreme Will (*al-irada al-’ulya*) has handed over the reins of the earth to man and given him free play; he has charged him with bringing out the intention of the Creator in the unfolding of the creation” (Qutb, quoted in Steppat 1989, 169). Taking into account Steppat’s findings Tlili sees “substantial evidence that there is a discrepancy between the modern understanding of the term *khalifa* and what the word meant to the Qur’an’s earliest audiences” (Tlili 2012, 121).

Tlili subsequently mentions a number of Qur’anic restrictions and stipulations on the succession theme. These are:

“(1) that this replacement is a grace from Him [God] (7/al-A’raf: 69, 74);

(2) that the succeeding party needs to show gratitude and thankfulness (7/al-A’raf : 69, 74);

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– deputy of God. By the time of the exegetes discussed by Tlili this usage had become the norm and the khalifat became an institution equivalent to a kingship based on divine right. For a discussion of earlier exegetes and their discomfort with this change see Al-Qadi (1990).

(3) that the succeeding party needs to abide by God's commands (7/al-A'raf : 74);

(4) that the purpose of this *istikhlāf* [participle construction of the noun] is to test the replacing party (7/al-A'raf: 129; 10/Yūnus: 14);

and (5) that if the successors fail to obey God and to show thankfulness, they will be replaced by yet another party (11/Hūd: 57)." (Tlili 2012, 122)

Summing up her discussion of the concept khalifa Tlili states that the opinion that "humans are specifically entrusted to rule on behalf of God over the natural world (...) is hardly defensible" (Tlili 2012, 122). She further notes that "early exegetes understood the word khalifa as denoting the succession of Adam and his progeny to the former inhabitants of the earth (jinn)"; later "the word khalifa was interpreted as 'vicegerent'" albeit "in a purely human context" of political authority (Tlili 2012, 122). The idea "that humankind at large was entrusted with a representational role *vis-à-vis* the natural world (...) became prevalent only in the modern era" (Tlili 2012, 123). Finally, "etymologically the root *kh-l-f* does not denote the ideas of representation and authority" (Tlili 2012, 123; see also al-Qadi 1990). The challenge that Tlili conveys is thus more than justified and moreover it is potentially a building block for an egalitarian interpretation of Islam in which humans are neither despots nor 'benign' rulers of the earth, but simply another live form that dwells on this planet (Tlili 2012).

Yet, vegan Muslims do not necessarily share this challenge of the common interpretation of khalifa, as evident in Nagad's video (2016) and on the Facebook page of *The Vegan Muslim*.<sup>27</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> April 2018 s/he posted a meme with the English mainstream translation of Surah 5 verse 165: "It is he who has appointed you a vicegerent on the earth". This post was commented by *The Vegan Muslim*

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<sup>27</sup> The same can be said about Nagad, who quotes the Qur'an (al-Nahl:5-8): "And cattle has he created for you, numerous benefits you derive, and of their meat you eat" (Nagad 2016: 3:31). Nagad sees this quote as a reason why "Veganism and Islam might clash" (Nagad 2016: 3:35), because "ethical vegans believe that animals aren't our slaves and they are not here on this planet for us" (Nagad 2016: 3:40). Despite this seeming contradiction, Nagad does consider herself an ethical vegan, while upholding the idea that cattle were put on the planet for humans.

with “So take care of it”, which signals agreement with this translation and thus the idea that humans are indeed the vicegerents on earth. *The Vegan Muslim* is thus, similar to Nagad, an example for a Muslim who has chosen to shed the perceived privileges inherent in the position of a vicegerent by adopting veganism. However the position itself, and thus the associated privileges are not questioned in principle. Their examples show that some Muslims who adopt veganism are satisfied with the idea of being a benign ruler.<sup>28</sup> The fact that some vegan Muslims argue for veganism on environmental grounds using the notion of *khalifa* in its interpretation as vicegerent shows that there is no need to reject anthropocentric interpretation on principle and sheds doubt whether large numbers of Muslims will soon come to a non-anthropocentric understanding of the *khalifa*, in spite of the arguments and clear evidence presented by Tlili (2012), Steppat (1989) and al-Qadi (1990). The question is perhaps also a strategic one: while the natural environment is destroyed in an unprecedented manner, the interpretation which convinces more humans, Muslim or not, to take care of the environment and its inhabitants should perhaps be given preference for now. Theological and philosophical debates, as interesting and important they may be, should not overshadow the immediacy of the crisis and the urgent need to change patterns of behaviour as laid out by Ripple et al (2017) and advocated for by a growing number of vegan Muslims.

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<sup>28</sup> This position is, as mentioned earlier, also held by Islamic environmentalists such as Islam and Islam (2015) and Rahman (2017).

## **Chapter 3: Becoming and being a vegan Muslim**

“Autoethnographies are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience.” (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015:1)

It is perhaps appropriate to offer at this point a reflexive account of my own experience of becoming and the challenges of being a vegan Muslim. This chapter thus describes my conversion to Islam in 2012, including the personal identity issues that followed. In doing so, I will address the question about the connection of Veganism and Islam from my own subjective perspective. To describe the events, the internal processes and the external influences that culminated in my conversion in full detail is neither desirable nor possible here, which leaves me in the precariously powerful position to decide what to narrate and how, and which parts to omit and why. No matter which angle I choose as a point of departure then, this short auto-ethnographic narrative will reveal only a small part of the picture. However, by discussing the genesis of my positionality, I hope to give the reader a better and fairer access to the experience which made this research conceivable, and influenced the research design as well as interpretation of data presented in this dissertation. It follows a reflexive account of my experience based on an interpretivist position in order to better “reflect the blurred lines between insider and outsider, and researcher and researched” (Abbots 2017, 7; see also Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015; Pensoneau-Conway, Adams & Bolen 2017; Bolen 2018).

It seems that relating my conversion story is an integral part of being a convert to Islam. Despite having had numerous opportunities at this exercise I must admit that narrating my story in a satisfactory way is still a challenge as my conversion was a radical departure in thought, speech, and action from my previous ways – a profound transformation on all levels of my being, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. To sum this process up in a few words ultimately does injustice to the various factors involved, yet explaining each of these factors in full detail is beyond the scope of this

dissertation or most conversations that I have about this topic. However I can mention the factors, which include my family background, upbringing, travels, and spiritual experiences.

I was born into a family of practicing Christians (Mennonite on my mother's side and Free Evangelical on my father's side) and thus grew up with the idea of an Almighty God as the creator of the whole universe. The doctrine of the divine trinity however was never pushed by my parents or in the churches I visited and thus I grew up with Jesus Christ as a powerful, mystical, and metaphysical being, as my friend and protector without deifying him.<sup>29</sup> In 2001, at age 13, my family moved to Berlin into a neighbourhood which was strongly influenced by people with Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish roots, and I was subsequently exposed to a range of Islamic traditions and Muslim cultures. Over the years I had the chance to travel through a number of Muslim majority countries on different occasions: a holiday with friends in Turkey in 2008; a university excursion to pre-war Syria, followed by private travels in Jordan, and Lebanon in 2010; a journey across the southern Asian continent with stays in Malaysia, Iran, and Lebanon as well as stopovers in Turkey and Abu Dhabi, on my way from Aotearoa/New Zealand to Germany in 2011. In the winter 2011/2012 then, after a sequence of unusual dreams, I accepted Islam as my religion, or rather I realized that I had been a Muslim all along.

This was more or less the story I shared with an appreciative audience in 2014 during a 'Converts Talk' at the University of Otago (as part of the annual Islam Awareness Week). In 2017, again at the Converts Talk, I had grown in confidence about my position and I was able to talk about my struggles as a Muslim convert who not only favors Sufism as a branch of Islam, but who also supports feminist ideals and is an ethical vegan. It was very challenging and just a minute before I started to talk the local Imam walked in, whose mosque I hadn't visited for some years! Thus I was

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<sup>29</sup> The importance of this lies in the fact that the deification of Jesus Christ, referred to as Jesus, son of Mary by many Muslims, is strictly rejected in Islamic theology.

given the chance to not only tell other Muslims of my personal struggles as a one-person minority within a minority of a minority. Taking my heart into the hand I told the spiritual leader of the local community why I am not coming to the one mosque in our town, voicing a modest and respectful, but dedicated challenge to the status quo of gender segregation. In the explanation for my adherence to ethical veganism I referred to the banner set up in the lecture theatre, which showed a verse of the Qur'an chosen as the motto of that years' Awareness Week, which incidentally supported my argument. It read: "Indeed, God orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded." (Surah an-Nahl:90). Surprisingly nobody got angry or offended, as nobody could argue against the fact that injustice, cruelty and oppression are the norm in factory farms and thus an internalised part of people's life through their diets and consumption habits. Thus instead of condemnation I received some unexpected support and was asked some interesting questions after the talk. It felt like a coming out, so liberating! Afterwards I even heard of people who had adjusted their diets.

I must have had a good day, since on previous occasions, usually in private conversations in the local mosque during the years 2014 and 2015, I was confronted with disapproval. Veganism, abstaining from all animal products all the time, was seen by many as too extreme. *Islam is a religion of moderation, of the middle way* I heard again and again. I would almost apologetically respond that 'God made me a Muslim, and God made me a Vegan.' Yet, although my heart was convinced that for me Islam and Veganism belong inseparably together, my mind, confronted with these rejections, became nervous and started asking uncomfortable questions at that time. 'Every Muslim eats meat, they can't all have it wrong, or can they?', 'What about the blood sacrifice on Eid Al-Adha?', 'If Muhammad ate meat, then why should a Muslim not eat meat?', 'Perhaps, you entered the wrong religion after all?' I admitted to the audience in 2017, that these questions, as well as my disapproval of the officially propagated and instituted gender relations, would have been enough to make me

leave the religion of Islam again if my mind would have been in charge. Unfortunately I was not familiar then with the work of Ghilan, who argued so convincingly that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) would never agree to contemporary practices of animal agriculture and thus to the consumption of animals and animal products (Ghilan 2018a, 2018b); and that the cruelty in the treatment of animals in and the destructive nature of the industry, paired with the resource wastefulness need to be seen as opposed to the example of our Prophet and indeed transgressions of Islamic law (Ghilan 2018a, 2018b). ‘Luckily’, I said, ‘my conversion to Islam was not the result of my own will, the product of a mental process’. Instead Islam was chosen for me by God. I entered Islam as a result of what I called then a ‘divine intervention’ which prevents me both from ever leaving Islam or dropping veganism as my way. What had happened?

When I was a young teenager my family had left the church for various reasons. At the age of 14 perhaps 15 my mother initiated me into Buddhist philosophy and practice. Under her guidance, I experimented with different meditation techniques like sitting still, meditating on the heart, on the flame of a candle, on my image in the mirror, on contemplative music, on my own breathing, or the energy flow in my body. I had many interesting experiences and benefitted from the practice in several ways. Years later on the eve of my conversion to Islam I sat in meditation and was granted some transcendental experiences of a kind I had not experienced before or, to my great sorrow, after. Although I did not know it at that time, it were these experiences that not only made me realise my Muslim identity and triggered the transition to veganism but that led me on the path of Sufism, often referred to as Islamic mysticism.<sup>30</sup> I surrendered to the awareness that my consciousness and my perception of material reality are ultimately limited and that beyond that limitation there is another reality. I learned that this reality is characterized by compassion and justice, and that through

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<sup>30</sup> Sufism can be defined as “the esoteric dimension of the Islamic faith, the spiritual path to mystical union with God” (Oxford University Press 2018), the “mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018), or as “a school for the actualization of divine ethics” (Nimatullahi Sufi Order 2011-2014).

awareness of it I can manifest these qualities in the material reality. The way to do this is to be compassionate and just myself and to be so in all dealings and relationships. Now admittedly that is an extremely difficult task, but certain things are very easy once the willpower is activated. I was driven to change the way I sustained myself, as my daily food was derived from the violent oppression and cruel exploitation of other living beings. This realization then, that in order to be compassionate and just, which for many Muslims is the core of the Islamic message, I had to eat with compassion and reject unjust oppression of other creatures, is in a nutshell the connection between Islam and veganism from my perspective. Yet where did this awareness come from?

I was pacified by exposure to what some Sufis have called *Divine Light*.<sup>31</sup> In a glimpse into the reality beyond our material realm I gained *ma'rifa* (experiential knowledge) of certain things. The concept, essential to the Sufi path, is explained by the renowned Sheikh Nazim al Haqqani as receiving knowledge not through external mediation but through personal experience (Shams Khan 2016; see also Nasr 1990). I gained knowledge of God's presence in all things and of God's love for all beings. I gained knowledge of my purpose in this world. And I gained knowledge of the simple truth: all creation is embraced by God's Love<sup>32</sup>. In fact love is seen by some classical Sufis as the first emanation of the Divine in the moment of creation (see As-Sarraj in Renard 2004). All creation praises the creator (as described in chapter 59 verse 24 of the Qur'an). All animals are endowed with dignity and with intelligence, with the capacity to think, to feel, and to suffer (see Tlili 2012). As I entered the path of Sufism, it became my duty towards God and towards all creation to reduce the amount of suffering created through my existence in this world to a minimum. I do realize that to live means to die and that my living necessarily involves destruction. But to the objection that veganism is too

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<sup>31</sup> See for example Ihsan Alexander's introduction to Sufism on YouTube.

<sup>32</sup> A similar process of surrender is also described in the context of (conversion) experiences of charismatic Christians by Karla Poewe (1989). I can personally relate very well to her description. Poewe speaks of "surrender, power, use of the passive imagination which heeds inner promptings, dreams, and visions, involuntary joy, spiritual illumination, insights through signs and signals, and love" (Poewe 1989, 365).

extreme, or that it too involves suffering for animals, I say veganism lies in the moderate middle of starving myself to death in meditation in order to have no part in destruction on one end of the spectrum and sustaining myself through violent exploitation of other animals while ignoring their suffering on the other end. As a plant eater I inevitably still depend on destruction for sustenance, but the amount of suffering that my diet involves is reduced to a fraction of my pre-conversion diet. I can thus through a vegan diet uphold my vow to be compassionate and just, although admittedly on other fronts I am consistently failing.

While the conversion itself was like an instantaneous transformation of my heart, my mind was left fragmented. While experiencing the highest highs of spiritual fulfilment upon encountering what some Sufis and Shias call the *Inner Imam* (Nasr 1999), I was plunged into a deep personal crisis. I was plagued by a loss of identity and episodes of paranoia and doubt about what had happened and how and why. This process helped me to realize first hand that “the self is always a construction” (Abu-Lughod in Lewin 2006, 155). The identity I had built growing up in Berlin was greatly influenced by patriarchal notions of the dominant alpha-male with its focus on rank and status constructed in opposition to others, and the privileges I had as a healthy white male. After my travels and my encounters with the inner dimension of my being I became aware that quite literally I too am the other, and the boundary between myself and the other blurred. It was as if my old self had died and a new me had arisen, strange to myself and strange to my family and friends. It was as if the journey to the core of my being made it impossible to relate to my social environment in the way I did before. Few were the friends who I could rely on in this time and who stood by my side. I was so vulnerable and in need of a nurturing environment. Thus I decided to move to Aotearoa NZ in order to be close again to the great teacher I have had for all my life – my mother. Only slowly did my mind catch up with the radical transformation of my being, and as the fragmented parts were reconfiguring

themselves under her loving care, I was becoming whole again. I could accept the idea that my heart was indeed purified, in the sense that ignorant indifference was replaced by love and compassion.

Changing my diet was easy. A great challenge was what followed. As I struggled with my new identity I became more and more aware of the depths of a patriarchal programming in my mind. I realized that my conviction to respect all living beings necessitated not only a change in my diet but also a paradigm shift towards feminist ideals. This was easier said than done. The struggle, I must admit, continues to this day. Great help in this challenging and ongoing process comes from my (non-Muslim, but vegan) partner. The relationship with my partner grounded me in this reality after I had been shaken to the core by my spiritual transformation. I deepened my understanding of Islam considerably as we read and discussed Muslim feminist writers such as Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod and Amina Wadud. I am thus most grateful for her support on this journey. Yet although she completed my faith, as the Islamic saying goes, I must admit that it was only upon finding other vegan Muslims that I could fully dismiss the idea that something might be wrong with my way of being a Muslim. Learning about and from other vegan Muslims, especially in the *Vegan Muslim Community*, gave me hope and confidence and undeniably encouraged me to undertake this study. There I found individuals who have the same beliefs and share the same values about life as myself. During my research I found the following post on social media, which defines (in a rather unconventional way) what it means to be a Muslim and although it cannot be claimed that this definition is shared or even acceptable by all (vegan) Muslims it resonates strongly with me and is perhaps telling of the basic philosophy of someone who identifies as vegan and Muslim:

I believe it [what makes one a Muslim] is understanding that the world and the universe are one and the same. Connected by molecules, atoms, light, energy and everything in between. It is to live being aware of every decision and every action you make and that it will have a consequence, here and after. What makes one Muslim is love   love for themselves, love

for other humans, love for animals, love for nature, and love for the universe. And to have love guide every decision and every action made in this world, with the backhand of knowledge and wisdom. – The Vegan Muslim<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Posted on 'The Vegan Muslim' Facebook page on May 28, 2018. The emphasis on love and the metaphysical experience of the universe expressed in this post indicate an inclination towards Sufism, however the user does nowhere explicitly affirm this speculation.

## Chapter 4: Vegan Muslims

Veganism is a phenomena experienced and embodied by a growing number of Muslims. Social media offer a good record of discussions about veganism by Muslims.<sup>34</sup> As part of my research I have followed vegan Muslims who share their opinions and stories on blogs, in Facebook groups and on Facebook pages, on Instagram and Twitter accounts. I have observed and participated in dedicated online forums and witnessed the extensive discussions first hand. Important threads in these discussions are vegan advocacy, offering or asking for support, and of course the sharing of recipes. The first section of this chapter presents results of a survey conducted in one of the online communities. A second section provides examples of Muslim who engage in online advocacy of veganism.

A unifying theme is concern for the wellbeing of (other) animals, while environmentalism, personal health, and piety are also important factors in Muslims decision to embrace veganism. Ethical concerns are expressed in a feeling of compassion and manifests in the rejection to eat animals or consume any other animal products – the primary marker a vegan lifestyle. Secondly they see the oppression of other animals as unjust and unjustifiable. Those who draw on Islamic sources in their justification of veganism stress the importance of compassion and justice in the Qur'an and the hadith. Their way of being Muslim defines a version of Islam that is markedly different from others. The notions of compassion and justice are extended to include animals and applied to their logical conclusion. It seems that vegan Muslims through their engagement with Islamic sources seek and find continuity with Islamic tradition rather than distinction from non-vegan Muslims. And they are, despite the challenges they face, firm in their Muslim identity. Another interesting and perhaps important commonality lies in a shared experience: I did not come across a single second generation

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<sup>34</sup> A great discussion about Islam and vegetarianism, featuring many vegan arguments can be found on <http://www.vegblog.org/archive/2003/10/01/islam-and-vegetarianism/>.

vegan, which means that all the individuals I encountered went through a transitional phase involving a change in habits, feelings, and thought patterns.<sup>35</sup> In this chapter I will follow the Intersectional Islamic studies approach that grants ordinary believers the right and ability to speak for and define Islam (Chaudhry 2017), in line with the focus on the *feeling to be* Muslim (Marranci 2008), which allows for a multitude of possible ways to be a Muslim.

### **a) The ‘Vegan Muslim Community’ – A survey**

On February 15, 2018 the homepage of METRO published Faima Bakar’s article *Does veganism go against Muslim beliefs?* The article offers an account of the diversity of vegan Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK) regarding their cultural, national, and ethnic backgrounds and narrates the experience of four individuals who identify as vegan and as Muslim. My intent here is to add to the description of this diversity and include factors such as religious and spiritual attitudes, while highlighting commonalities. Muslims interested in veganism do not necessarily share a single approach to their religion or religious authorities. Neither do they agree on approaches to and interpretations of the Qur’an and the hadith. Underlying their varying approaches are presumably philosophical positions either explicitly formulated or implicitly embodied. Is this incoherence too strong to speak of a common identity as vegan Muslims? If “(...) identity is a machinery of personal imagination allowing vital coherence between the individual and his or her environment” (Marranci 2008, 11), than we could not speak of shared or common identities without assuming a shared imagination. Vegan Muslims however seem to share imaginations, not only about the existence of God and their relation to the divine, but also about the nature of and their relation to nonhuman animals. As the results of the survey show, ethical concerns for animal rights and welfare are shared by nearly all respondents. The existence of popular online groups might further indicate a bond that connects and unites them and distinguishes them from non-vegan Muslims.

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<sup>35</sup> To explore this transition is, however, not the focus of this dissertation.

This section presents the findings of a survey conducted in the closed Facebook group 'Vegan Muslim Community'. The supportive administrators of the group not only allowed me to run the survey, they assisted by promoting it and pinning it in the top of the newsfeed for about four weeks. The nature of the group's settings at the time reduced available survey-types to a self-selected survey. As a consequence of the recruitment method the survey cannot be used to generate quantifiable prognoses or representative results, but this was not intended here. Instead I use the survey as an interpretive tool helpful to describe the diversity of vegan Muslims. Answers collected in the survey are used to address questions of identity and localization of vegan Muslims. Questions included why Muslims chose to adopt a vegan lifestyle, where vegan Muslims are based, what kind of Muslim they feel to be, and which (if any) branch of Islam they follow. Most questions were open-ended and allowed multiple answers as well as comments. The survey ran from 19 February 2018 to 17 May 2018. In that time I collected 46 responses. As a kind of safety measure I started the survey with a question concerning the respondents' identity in regards to Islam and veganism. Out of the 46 responses 39 identified as vegan (84.78%), while 42 identified as Muslim (91.30%), which indicates that 39 out of the 46 participants, were vegan Muslims.

The group has close to 5,000 thousand of members, while more are joining daily. The administrators accept requests from non-vegans and non-Muslims who have an interest in Islam and Veganism, although the majority seems to be identify as both vegan and Muslim. The aim of the group is not explicitly stated anywhere, but it seems obvious from posts that this group is utilized by members to learn about veganism (often but not exclusively from a Muslim perspective), to share stories, ideas, inspirations, and challenges as vegan Muslims, as well as to simply share recipes. As vegan Muslims are often the only vegans in their family and usually they have to face resistance amongst family members (as Amal and Farman have witnessed; see also Hakim2017h), they might be

attracted to this group as they can talk openly about their experience and discuss questions and problems without the danger of inciting someone's wrath.

Due to the 'closed' status of the group I cannot cite posts freely, which is why I chose to conduct a survey amongst group members. As mentioned in chapter one there are a number of similar groups on Facebook: 'Muslim Vegans', 'Raw Vegan Muslims', 'Muslims Vegans for Healthy World', 'Animal Rights and Animal Welfare in Islam', or 'Environment and Animals Rights in Islam' illustrate how Muslims with an interest in veganism or related topics are connecting online and advocating the ideals of veganism. While any of these pages could have been the site for the survey I chose the one group that included the word *community* in its name, as I was in my research interested in questions of identity and the connections between vegan Muslims.<sup>36</sup> Several biases are identified in the sample selection. Participants were required to have access to the internet to answer the survey. Participants had to have a Facebook account and be member of the *Vegan Muslim Community*. They further needed to be able to read and, to a lesser extent, write in English (for the comment section). This selection bias limits the generalizability of the results but the focus provided is also a strength, as it provides a picture about religious characteristics of English speaking social media users who are Muslims with an interest in veganism.

The second question inquired about the reasons of participants for adopting veganism. The survey offered the choice between five reasons (see Figure 1), while choosing multiple reasons was possible. Options included the common reasons to adopt a vegan diet, namely 'environmental justice', 'social justice', 'animal rights', and 'personal health benefits'. Additionally I gave the option 'for the sake of God', to do justice to religious or spiritual sentiments of the respondents. The

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<sup>36</sup> Incidentally, the chosen group was not only the largest group, but it also seemed to be the fastest growing one amongst the groups observed.

question was answered by all 46 respondents.<sup>37</sup> The overwhelming majority of survey participants, namely 91%, cited concerns for animal rights as a reason. The second most important reason was environmentalism which accounted for 74% of responses, followed closely by personal health with 70%. Social justice issues were less significant but still important for more than half of the respondents (54%). Adopting veganism for the sake of God, indicating a certain piousness, was the least favoured answer but was still named by every second respondent (50%).

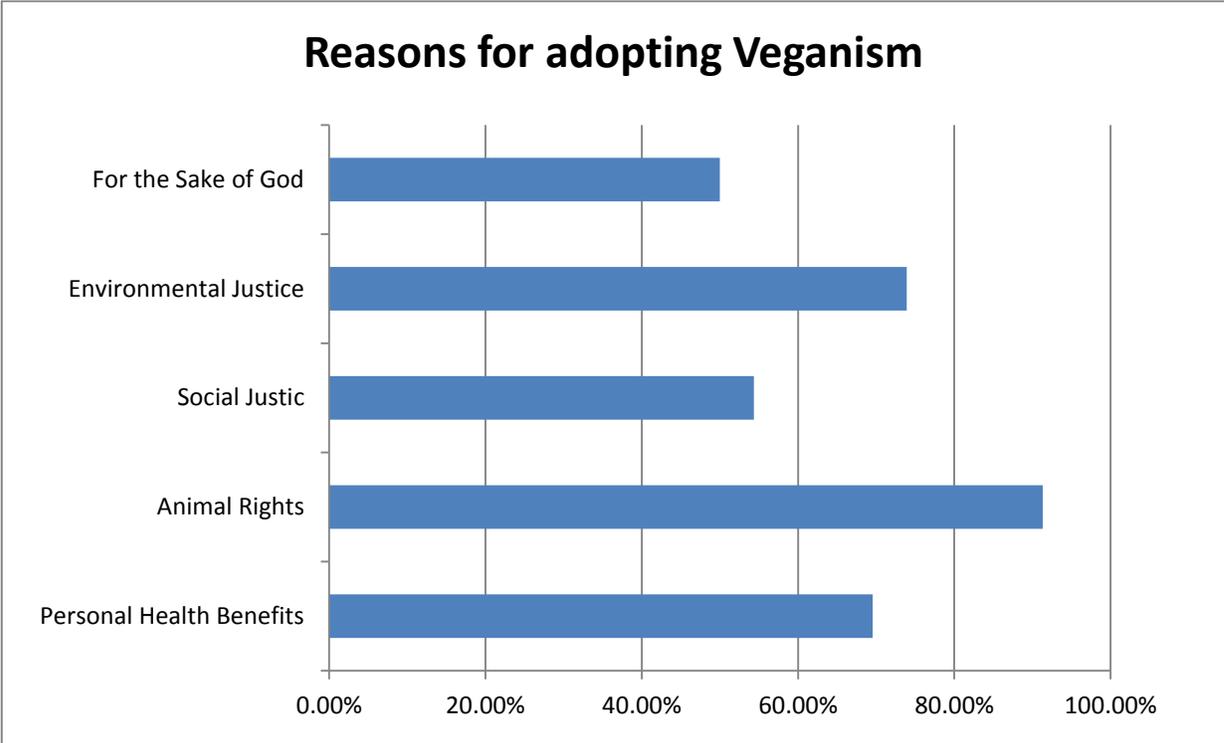


Figure 1: Reasons for adopting veganism, Duke McLeod 2018

The fact that the vast majority of respondents embraced veganism not for their own immediate benefit but for the sake of oppressed beings, is in itself quite revealing. It also helps to explain the results of the next question, which asked whether embracing veganism was a liberation or a struggle. Some 39 respondents said it was a liberation, while only 10 said it was a struggle. That the

<sup>37</sup> The fact that all 46 respondents answered this question is interesting given that only 39 (84.78%) identified as vegan in question one.

combined number of 49 is three over the total responses is explained by the possibility of double answers and suggests that for some respondents the embracing of veganism was both a liberation and a struggle.<sup>38</sup>

Further I was interested if followers of any branch of Islam are more likely to adopt veganism. I thus put the question *Which branch of Islam do you follow?* into the survey and received 37 responses, while 9 participants skipped the question. It is perhaps noteworthy that this was the only question which was skipped by a considerable amount of participants, which could signal uneasiness with categorization or an indicator for non-denominationalism. The possible answers were Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and Wahhabi/Salafi, which I asked participants to specify in the comment section. Multiple answers were again possible. The outcome of the question gives some clues about the representativeness of the sample and offers a surprise as well (Figure 2). As expected, the majority of

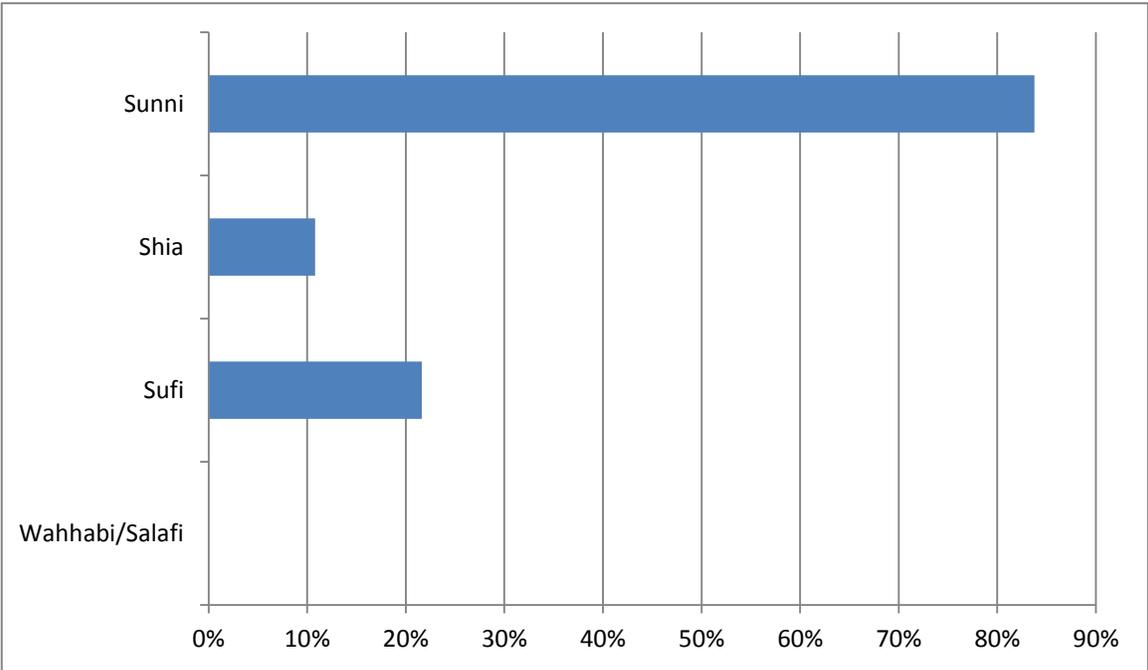


Figure 2: Denomination of Participants, Duke McLeod 2018

<sup>38</sup> It is often noted by advocates of veganism that people who adopt the vegan lifestyle for personal health reasons struggle harder and are more likely to ‘fall back’ to their previous diet, while people who embrace veganism for the animals are usually both steadfast and indeed see the changing of eating habits as a liberation.

respondents, namely 31, reported to follow Sunni Islam (83.78%), while four named an affiliation with Shia Islam (10.81%). The percentages here roughly reflect the actual figures for Muslims globally, which can be read as an indicator that the sample is indeed somehow representative of the larger Muslim population. A surprise was that eight participants chose the answer 'Sufi' (21.62%), while zero claimed to be Wahhabi/Salafi. In addition to the nine participants that skipped the question altogether, there are four who left a comment that directly indicates non-denominationally,<sup>39</sup> which brings the number up to 13, roughly 31%. This number can potentially be even further increased as four respondents stated explicitly to follow the Qur'an only.

While the exact number of Sufis amongst the total Muslim population is hard to gauge due to a number of reasons, estimates see them at 5% (PEW 2012). This means that while the percentage of Sunni and Shia Muslims are more or less accurate, Sufis are greatly overrepresented in the sample. This might of course just be the case because followers of the Sufis branch are more likely to partake in a survey, be on Facebook, or to seek community, or because Sufism is popular amongst English speaking Muslims. If they are indeed more likely to adopt veganism is perhaps to be determined by future research, but it already sparks interesting questions and potential hints on the form 'Islamic Veganism' might take. If followers of the Sufi path are more open to vegan advocacy, does that mean that the vast majority of Muslims who are not identifying as Sufis are less likely to adopt veganism? The underlying question is the following: is the way Muslims understand, live, and embody Islam key to the adoption of veganism, or are perceptions generated by other factors than piety and religiosity decisive?

Perhaps veganism is more attractive for Muslims who take Islam not to be a strict set of rules specified by elite others who are specialized in interpretation of primary sources. To clarify this

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<sup>39</sup> For example respondent #44, who identified as Sunni, but stated "I do not follow any one strictly" in the comment section (23 March 2018).

question, I asked participants about their attitude towards Islam, respectively what kind of Muslim they think themselves to be. The answers to this question (Figure 3) are offering some clarity in many regards. For example only three out of the 46 participants (6.5%) stated to be a 'religious Muslim' ('following the shari'a to the letter of the word'), while more than half (25, 54.35%) saw themselves as spiritual Muslims ('following the spirit of the Qur'an'). Some 17 participants (36.96%) stated to be practicing Muslims ('adhering to the 5 pillars of Islam'), while four participants (8.70%) declared to be cultural Muslims ('secular'). Only one participant (2.17%) identified as non-Muslim, while five participants ticked the box 'other' (10.87%).<sup>40</sup>

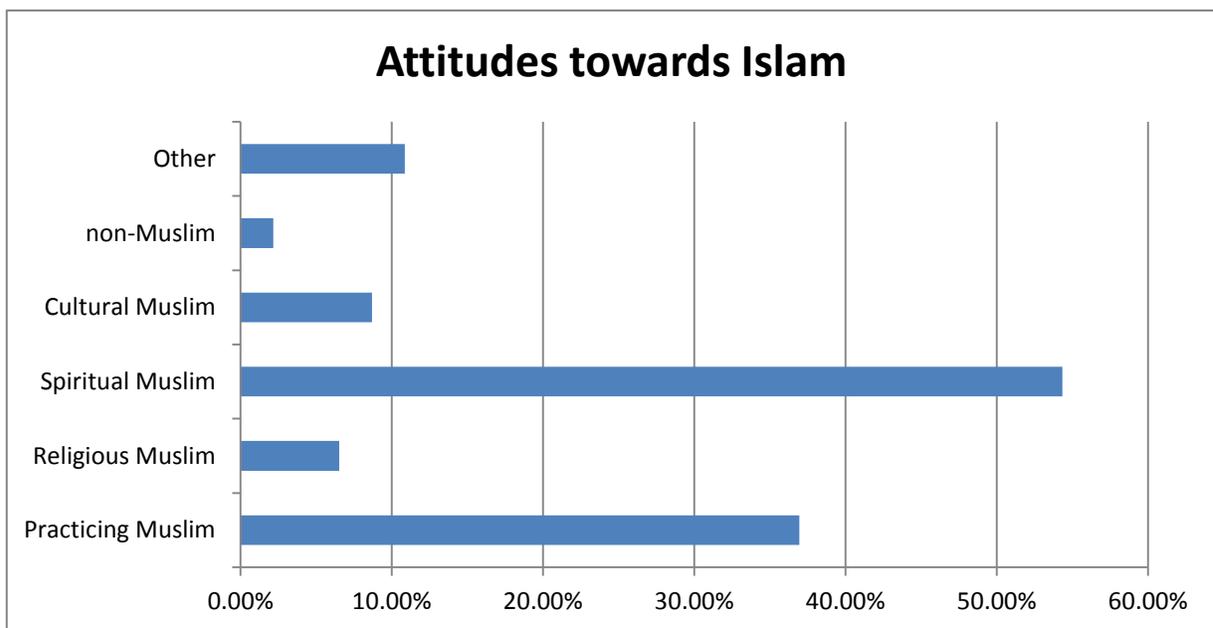


Figure 3: Attitudes towards Islam, Duke McLeod, 2018

Surprising is also that only 21 participants state to be born and raised as Muslim (45.65%), while 18 identified as convert (39,13%). This is significant, as these numbers of course do not reflect the percentage of converts in the total population of numbers. This raises a lot of questions. Perhaps converts are more likely to adopt a vegan lifestyle. It might be easier for converts to adopt a lifestyle

<sup>40</sup> Taken together these six answers are likely to account for the six respondents who did not identify as Muslim in question one of the survey.

that is sometimes seen to be in conflict with traditional Islam because they did not grow up within that tradition. Maybe they are more likely to be influenced by western ideas of veganism and animal rights, or more likely to respond to an online survey. They could have more supportive family members or face less opposition from relatives. Or they could have been vegan before their conversion to Islam. A conclusive answer to this question cannot be given here. What is clear however is that vegan Muslims have a variety of spiritual, geographical, and cultural backgrounds.

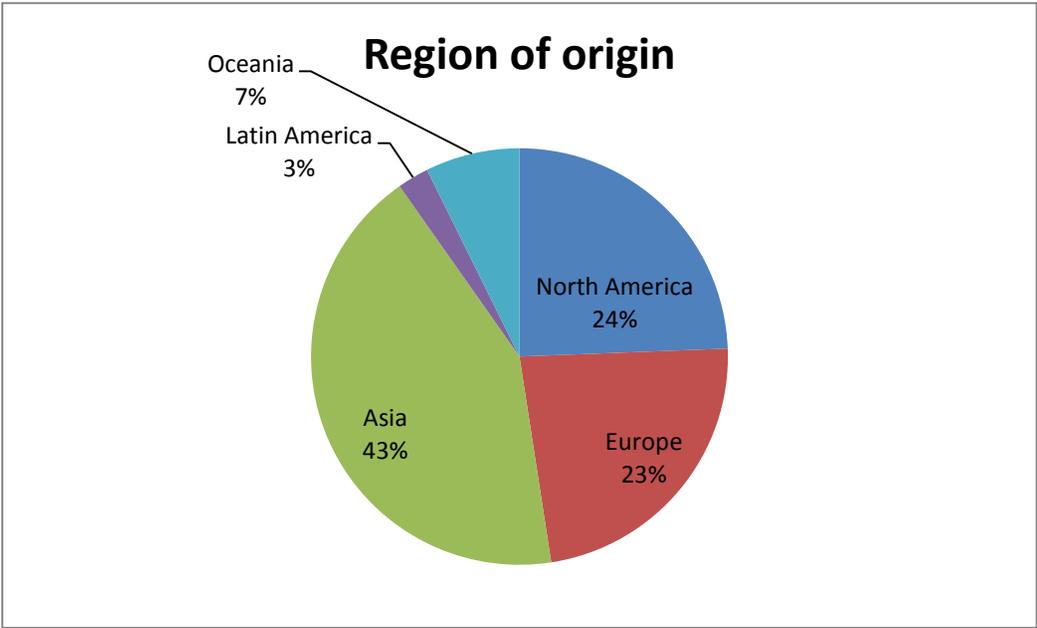


Figure 4: Region of Origin, Duke McLeod 2018

The get a sense of where vegan Muslims are coming from the survey posed the question about participants country of origin. The answers show that respondents come predominantly from South and South East Asia, followed by North and Latin America, East and West Europe, North Africa, and Oceania (Figure 4). South America is the only continent which was not named in the survey. It is interesting to see in the analysis is the grouping of answers into regions. The country of origin of 21 respondents lies in North America, Europe, or Australia, while Asia and Africa provide a combined total of 23, which means that almost every second of the respondents comes from a (predominantly white and) western country, where Muslims are a minority of the population. Given the relatively

much smaller number of Muslims in western countries compared with Muslim majority countries these answers might indicate that converts or children of migrants in western countries are indeed more likely to adopt veganism than Muslims from Muslim majority countries. The single most named country of origin are the United States of America (USA) (nine out of 46). Now this might just reflect the relative size of the total population and the high proportion of Internet users or a distinct culture of utilizing social media for various purposes. Yet the results give also rise to speculations whether a disproportionately high percentage of vegan Muslims come indeed from the USA.

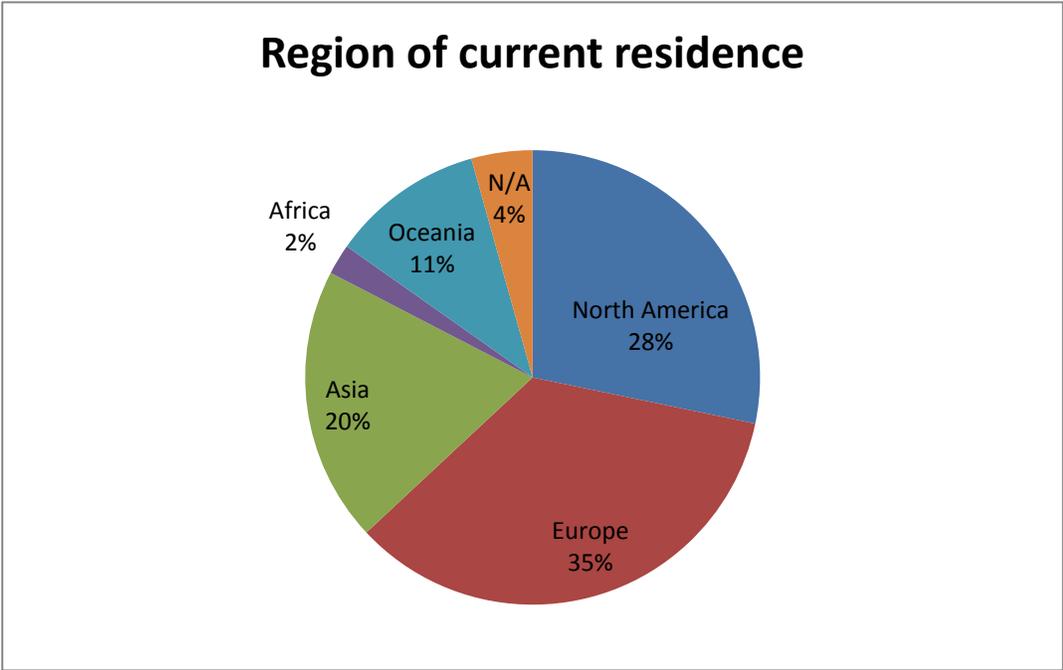


Figure 5: Region of current residence, Duke McLeod, 2018

Next to the country of origin, the survey asked participants about their current residence. Answers show significant changes between the country of origin and the current residence (Figure 5). Whereas 43% of participants stated a country in Asia as their country of origin, only 20% were still living in Asia at the time of the survey. Meanwhile the number of participants living in Europe (16, 35%) is considerably higher than those who stated a European country as their birthplace (9.5, 23%).

More participants also live in North America<sup>41</sup> (13, 28% up from 10, 24%) and Oceania<sup>42</sup> (five, 11% up from three, 7%), than were born there. The answers thus suggest that participants of Asian origin tend to migrate to western countries, primarily in Europe. An important question that arises out of this observation is whether these Muslims were vegan already when they migrated or whether they adopted veganism there.

It has been noted that issues of human-animal relations seem predominantly addressed in online spaces by 'westernized lay-Muslims' while they are ignored in traditional madrasas by the *ulema* class (Foltz 2006). While this observation cannot be proven or disproven by the survey, results could be interpreted in support of his claim. What can be said with certainty is that the survey provides a picture about the religious characteristics of English speaking Muslims with access to Internet and an interest in veganism. Members of the *Vegan Muslim Community* on Facebook that participated in the survey are primarily interested in veganism out of concerns for animal rights. However, personal health, social justice, piousness are also important factors for their interest in adopting a vegan lifestyle. There is a great diversity of backgrounds and religious attitudes amongst participants and thus amongst members of the *Vegan Muslim Community* and vegan Muslims in general. On the basis of the survey results it can be suggested that Muslims of different backgrounds and religious attitudes can potentially adopt a vegan lifestyle, while followers of a spiritual path as provided by Sufism are potentially more likely to transition to veganism.

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<sup>41</sup> In this case USA and Canada

<sup>42</sup> In this case Australia and New Zealand

## b) Online advocates

Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let [her or] him change it with [her or] his hand; and if [she or] he is not able to do so, then with [her or] his tongue; and if [she or] he is not able to do so, then with [her or] his heart; and that is the weakest of faith. (Prophet Muhammad, in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 49.)

The diversity amongst vegan Muslims is evident in the membership of the *Vegan Muslim Community*. This section puts the group into a context of attempts to change perceived evil with the tongue. It highlights the connection of the group to a platform of vegan advocacy and gives further examples of Muslims who share and promote their vegan ethics online. Analysis has shown that Islamic thought always feature an animal friendly tone, but that animal ethics have rarely been systematically explored (Foltz 2003; Tlili 2016). A notable contemporary exemption however is found in Imam al Hafiz Basheer Masri who together with Naqem Haque coauthored the article *The principles of Animal Advocacy in Islam* (Haque & Masri 2011), in which the authors take a strong animal rights stance and propose guiding principles for animal advocacy in Islam. The authors give a philosophical justification for animal advocacy in four distinct but interconnected principles (termed ecognitions = ecological recognitions), which are based on interpretation of the Qur'an. These are: (1) All nonhuman animals are a trust from God (stewardship)<sup>43</sup>, (2) equigenic rights (balance of nature) do exist and must be maintained, (3) all nonhuman animals live in communities, and (4) all nonhuman animals possess personhood (Haque & Masri 2011). The authors note the attribution of language, intelligence, reason and souls (*nafs* and *ruh*) to animals, as stated in the Qur'an, which would lead to revolutionary changes in the relationship between humans and animals and the environment if properly understood (Haque & Masri 2011, 282; see also Tlili 2012 and 2017). The four ecognitions

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<sup>43</sup> Tlili criticises the anthropocentric position of Masri, while acknowledging his outstanding animal rights advocacy (2015, 115).

are presented as the cornerstones of this transformation, constituting a basis for a universal charter of animal rights, which “can and ought to be established” (Haque & Masri 2011, 288). The charter would be imbued with *taqwa* (God consciousness), and lead to more compassionate and just human-nonhuman relationships (Haque & Masri 2011).

While this charter does not exist yet, there are dedicated efforts to advocate the vegan lifestyle, as for example on the homepage [www.VeganMuslims.com](http://www.VeganMuslims.com) run by the founders and administrators of the Facebook group *Vegan Muslim Community* under the name *Vegan Muslim Initiative*. The website features articles that address a wide range of vegan topics. Amongst them is the fundamental question *Why vegan?* (Hakim 2017a). Other articles invite Muslims to stop eating animals (Hakim 2018), explain the health benefits of a vegan lifestyle (Ataie 2017), offer words of support to fellow vegan Muslims (The Raggamuslims 2017), share a vegan travel log through Pakistan (Bakhtiar 2017), address anti-vegan family members (Hakim 2017h), call into question blood sacrifices on *Eid al-Adha* (Hakim 2017e), urge Muslim scholars to declare factory farming *haram* (Hakim 2017f), question the authority of Muslim leaders who fail to acknowledge (let alone address) contemporary issues related to animal agriculture (Hakim 2017d), expose the halal meat myth (Hakim 2017c), and state the need for a new *fiqh* (jurisprudence) to address the issues connected to contemporary industrial animal agriculture (Hakim 2017b). Hakim exemplifies in his efforts the freedom to engage with Islamic sources and interpret them according to his own understanding, without having gone through any formal Islamic education program (Sammer Hakim, Skype conversation with author, 28 March, 2018).

A similar effort is manifest in the website [www.animalsinislam.com](http://www.animalsinislam.com) (mentioned in chapter one) established by Ali Robert Tappan on behalf of PeTA, which features critical articles on factory farming, sacrifice, vivisection, fur, and the problems of the halal meat industry. An important difference between these sites is that the latter takes recourse to a few fatwas to confirm the

permissibility of vegetarianism and veganism for Muslims, a service which seems much in need given the narrations of Amal and Farman, who both have experienced strong opposition to their lifestyle choice. The latter platform thus takes recourse to some scholars, while the former criticises the lack of leadership and awareness amongst the educated elite, which might indicate a different stance towards religious authority. Another nuanced difference manifests in the names of the websites. While [www.veganmuslims.com](http://www.veganmuslims.com) is primarily dedicated to promote veganism, [www.animalsinislam.com](http://www.animalsinislam.com) places more weight on animal rights and welfare.

Despite the differences both pages share a strong focus on animal ethics. Both feature arguments that include environmentalism, social justice and personal health. The fact that both pages include specific references to Islamic primary sources reflects a certain level of piety on the side of the authors, and/or reflects the aim to address pious Muslims. This effort is exemplified in the conclusion of the article *Halal Vegetarianism* on [www.AnimalsInIslam.com](http://www.AnimalsInIslam.com): “Neither the kindness to animals taught by the Prophet (SAWS [sallallahu aleyhi wa salam - may God honour him and grant him peace]) nor the special place of animals as described in the Qur’an is reflected in modern methods of raising animals for food. Adopting a vegan diet (a diet free from meats, dairy products and eggs) is the easiest way for Muslims to live in accordance with the ethical, environmental, and health precepts of Islam” (PeTA 2018). Taken together these homepages are a great source of information from and about the perspectives of (vegan) Muslim animal rights advocates.<sup>44</sup>

There are also a number of Muslims who run their own public pages on social media on which they promote the vegan lifestyle. One of them is included here simply because her posts in the *Vegan Muslim Community* stood out to me; the other was selected due to its name. ‘The Vegan Muslim’ is a Facebook page, liked and followed by over 500 users, with a focus on health and wellness. The

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<sup>44</sup> Other examples are found on the website [www.themuslimvibe.com](http://www.themuslimvibe.com), which features an article entitled *Is it time more Muslims turned to veganism?*

Facebook page, which is connected to the homonymous blog *www.theveganmuslim.net*, states its aims as follows: “We align veganism with Islam's core values of well-being and welfare. ‘The Vegan Muslim’ aims to help, enlighten, and educate Muslims and non-Muslims on living a healthy, fit, and balanced life. We show you how to live a healthy and ethical lifestyle, from the foods you eat, to daily mindful practices, to adopting good habits. It’s your path to an all encompassing happy Muslim life.” (TheVeganMuslim/aims). Many vegans around the globe can relate to that, as does Farman, who mentioned in our conversation a positive change in energy levels, and in increase in general well-being upon his adoption of veganism.

Another example of the attempt to create awareness for veganism utilizing the internet and social media is Nausheen, who is active on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as ‘The Veiled Vegan’. While her Facebook page seems to be rather low key in its influence and content (38 abonnements and 15 posts), her Instagram story reaches a larger audience with (to date) 1306 abonnements and features hundreds of posts (642). These posts come mostly in the form of memes with a slogan, or a couple of sentences, providing a clear message, sometimes deliberately provocative sometimes just informative.<sup>45</sup> One of these not only illustrates a vegan Muslim perspective very well, but also raises many important questions. The post alludes to the living conditions of billions of animals in factory farms, animal research facilities, zoos and aquariums, and even pets by quoting a (less prominent) saying of the Prophet Muhammad:

*“It is a great sin for man to imprison those animals that are in his power.”* (Sahih Muslim)

The great importance of a saying like this comes not only from the inspiration it gives to people already concerned about the wellbeing of animals or its usefulness for online advocacy. Moreover, it rests in the fact that laws in countries like Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Iraq, Mauretania,

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<sup>45</sup>In the selection process for a representative post involved reading around a hundred of Nausheen’s posts. I looked for content that was very illustrative for a specific vegan Muslim perspective.

Maldives, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen are based on Islamic sources, the Qur'an and the hadith. Now if this is the case, why is it that the judges who make rulings in these countries are failing to recognize the un-Islamic nature of the living conditions of the vast majority of animals on this planet? How come there are no fatwas against factory farming? Where is the recognition that the meat derived from animals who have been treated in 'sinful' ways cannot be anything else than unlawful for consumption by Muslims? Why is there no ban on products that involve animal experimentation, when animals in laboratories are bred and kept in cages for the entirety of their short lives until they suffer a more or less horrible death? The animal rights and vegan advocacy manifest in homepages like [www.veganmuslims.com](http://www.veganmuslims.com) and [www.animalsinislam.com](http://www.animalsinislam.com), as well as on social media by individuals like Nausheen and 'TheVeganMuslim' contributes to the proliferation of ideas and information that have the potential to radically alter the way a large amount of people interact with animals. It seems that a dedicated animal rights charter as envisioned by Haqem and Masri (2011) is not only needed, but, in face of the various Muslim advocates of animal rights and veganism, just around the corner. Its implementation could help Muslim individuals and societies rediscover the great emphasis on animal rights and wellbeing that is evident in the Qur'an and the hadith.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion – Towards ‘Islamic Veganism’

same here sis, islam was a big catalyst in my decision to go vegan [heart image]. (...) However, when I encourage muslims to go vegan, I always combine my arguments with Islamic teachings! After telling them about the systematic torture and exploitation of animals, the effects animal farming has on our planet and how man bpoes [blacks and people of colour] around the world suffer as a direct cause as well, many give the same argument: ‘well, me going vegan won’t change anything on a larger scale – small groups of vegans won’t change the world blabla’ --> THIS is where islam comes in (...)

(‘Aishu Bubu’ in *Vegan Muslim Community*, 14 August, 2018)

Adopting a food philosophy that is not only good for me, but good for the animals, and the environment marries perfectly with all of my spiritual beliefs.

(Nada on her blog [www.onearabvegan.com](http://www.onearabvegan.com), 27 January, 2012)

A growing number of Muslims adopt veganism as a lifestyle and explain their choice with their adherence to Islamic tradition. They educate themselves and others utilizing online platforms and social media. The advocacy of veganism amongst Muslims and efforts to justify it in Islamic terms are evident in ‘Aushu Bubu’s’ comment. This attempt can ultimately lead to the establishment of a distinct interpretation of Islam, which I will label here as ‘Islamic Veganism’. The case for Islamic vegetarianism has already been made by Richard Foltz (2001, 2006).<sup>46</sup> This chapter goes beyond Foltz’s vision and discusses aspects of ‘Islamic Veganism’, which rests on a contextual approach to Qur’an and hadith as exemplified in Tlili (2015), and promotes the ideals of veganism through the use of shari’a and *adab* – Islamic ethics. The importance of non-anthropocentric interpretations of key concepts like khalifa will not be discussed here. Neither will this chapter address all the aspects

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<sup>46</sup> See chapter one.

(environmentalism, social justice, personal health, and piousness) and problems of 'Islamic Veganism' in satisfying depth. Instead this concluding chapter of the dissertation explores ways to advance the cause of animal rights, as a core principle of veganism, amongst individual Muslims and in Muslim societies.<sup>47</sup>

Sensitising key players in the religious establishment to the issues raised by veganism could trigger a cascade of change in light of the growing concern for piousness of Muslims around the world (PEW 2012). As of 30 August 2018, [www.AnimalsInIslam.com](http://www.AnimalsInIslam.com) stated "that in addressing animal rights, as indeed any other contemporary issue, Muslim attitudes are unlikely to undergo any widespread major shift without the support of the '*ulama*'" (PETA 2018). Given the influential position certain scholars of Islam have on public opinion and policy making this statement has some validity. However, this sentiment is not without problem as it potentially overemphasizes the role of elite scholars, to the disadvantage of ordinary people's agency. The problems of reliance by anthropologists on elite scholars to define Islam and Muslims are discussed by el-Zein, who dismisses the idea that a pure form of Islam is known and preserved by what he calls scripturalists (el-Zein 1977).<sup>48</sup> A similar position is expressed by Chaudhry in the Intersectional Islamic studies approach, which assumes that authority to study and interpret the Qur'an does not reside with traditionally trained scholars only (Chaudhry 2017). Rather, Islam "is defined by Muslims practicing and living their religion" (Chaudhry 2017, 25). Each believer has the right and duty to engage with scripture on their

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<sup>47</sup> For a detailed explanation of the contextual approach and how it differs from other approaches see Saeed (2006).

<sup>48</sup> Abdul El-Zein (1977) offers a substantial critique of anthropological and theological methodologies and assumptions of influential anthropological studies of Islam. To repeat his critique in any detail would be interesting but beyond the scope of this dissertation. However important to note is El-Zein's major points of contention. He discusses questions of authority and interpretation and more explicitly the tension between locally diverse expressions of Islam and a universal scholarly notion of Islam, and shows how anthropologists like Geertz, Gilsenan, and Eickelman emphasise the distinction between the diverse and culturally situated lay/folk/popular Islams and the universalist/scripturalist/ahistorical elitist Islam of scholars. El-Zein points out that those anthropologists, themselves producers of authoritative knowledge, implicitly side with the latter.

own terms and come to their own conclusions (Chaudhry 2017). Control of and power to interpret the text is not the exclusive right of a small group of male and orthodox individuals (Chaudhry 2017).<sup>49</sup> Ordinary Muslims who use Islamic teachings and references in their advocacy work veganism embody this approach. The next section follows this approach and argues that an engagement with Islam's primary sources can contribute greatly to the spread of vegan ideals.

### **a) Shari'a for Animal Protection**

Qurra ibn Iyas reported: A man said, 'O messenger of God, I was going to slaughter a sheep but I had mercy on it (or felt sorry for it).' The Messenger of God (pbuh) said, 'If you have mercy on the sheep, then God will have mercy on you twice. (al-Adab Al-Mufrad 373, in-book reference: book 20, hadith 2; english translation: book 20, hadith 373)

Narrated by 'Abdullah bin 'Umar: The Messenger of God told a story of a woman who was tortured and was put to hell because of a cat which she had kept locked till it died of hunger.' God's Messenger further said, 'God said (to the woman), 'You neither fed it nor watered it when you locked it up, nor did you set it free to eat the creatures of the earth.' (Bukhari, book 3, hadith 553)

Shari'a is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunna), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking. It has generally been supplemented by legislation adapted to the conditions of the day, though the manner in which it should be applied in modern states is a subject of dispute between Muslim traditionalists and reformists" (Oxford

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<sup>49</sup> However, these scholars have a significant influence, given the fact that individuals like Zakir Naik and the authors of related *fatwas* have millions of viewers/followers who are looking towards them for guidance. It seems in the light of their popularity that an engagement with Islamic primary sources bears some potential to advance the cause of veganism if findings are presented in the right format, while it is also essential to determine the basic philosophy of Islamic Veganism on the other side.

University Press 2018). An analysis of classical opinions and rulings addressing human-nonhuman relationships shows that products from industrial animal agriculture, and in fact any support or operation of those practices, must be considered impermissible for believers (see Furber 2017 for a detailed discussion). Since the vast majority of meat and animal products available to consumers are coming from industrial factory farms (Furber 2017), a plant based diet will remain as the only halal option for a large proportion of Muslims who wish to adhere to Islamic law.<sup>50</sup>

The issue of human-nonhuman relationships is treated from a legalistic perspective by a number of early, medieval, and contemporary scholars of Islam (Tlili 2012). Their anthropocentrism however, can be seen as a block on the way to unleash the full potential of the shari'a to protect nonhuman animals (Tlili 2012). Indeed speciesism is recognized as the unacceptable reason why ethical codes and legal rulings inspired by religious texts are not extended to non-human animals (Foltz 2006). Yet the possibility of utilizing shari'a to advance the cause of veganism, which is the cause of animal rights, environmental sustainability, and human health, is evidently possible from an anthropocentric perspective too. A legalistic approach (if successfully applied) can indeed result in dramatically reducing both the total number of animals raised and killed for human consumption as well as raise the welfare of the ones that are still being raised (Furber 2015, 2017; Wood 2017).<sup>51</sup> It is

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<sup>50</sup> It must be noted that the focus on scripture is not chosen in the belief that everything (vegan) Muslims do is determined by their understanding of the Qur'an (Chaudhry 2017), but rather driven by the question how they can integrate what they do with their professed beliefs. This is based on the premise that interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith define what Islam is (Chaudhry 2017; Marranci 2008) and further by the awareness that theological considerations do have a significant influence on social life in Muslim societies, as they influence decision making directly via public or private education, and indirectly by providing a political and legal framework for action. This is especially the case for nations which ground their political system explicitly in Islamic traditions, but also for members of Muslim communities who live in secular nations. Reinterpreting sources might thus not convince a majority of Muslims, but a text-based approach can be convincing for devout followers of religious traditions (Foltz 2006).

<sup>51</sup> The normative character of this approach evident in the selected authors might be subject to critique as it seemingly disrespects plurality in interpretation. Yet legal studies of scripture can also be seen as a competition of various normative interpretations with explicit recognition of plurality (Chaudhry 2017). The animal rights approach in Islam thus can be seen to favour a specific normative interpretation of Islam's primary sources in order to establish a new direction for human-nonhuman relationships, based on justice, respect, and compassion instead of abuse, oppression, and exploitation.

argued here that the concerns for animal rights evident in the above hadith, have the potential to bring about radical change if developed fully, and that the growing concern about animals and the environment is perhaps an indicator of a cultural shift in Muslim communities and societies.

Underlying the animal rights debate are questions of status, entitlement and violence. Tlili states that non-human animal's "sentiency is fully acknowledged in the mainstream tradition" (Tlili 2015, 226) and that furthermore animals are not only generally considered Muslim, but potentially better Muslims than humans (Tlili 2015). However there are scriptural foundations for the killing of animals, as evident in a verse of the Qur'an which (implicitly) allows the use of fatal violence to obtain food (Tlili 2015).<sup>52</sup> She states however that this permission is severely restricted by other Qur'anic passages (Tlili 2015). These restrictions (which include considerations about which animal to kill, which animals not to kill, how to kill, how not to kill) were further elaborated and specified in the hadith. Perhaps the most important restriction, mentioned by Tlili, is that killing of animals for any other reason than food is explicitly forbidden (Tlili 2015). Other scholars go beyond this statement and say that killing is only allowed in need (Foltz 2003).<sup>53</sup>

Tlili notes that while some jurists use anthropocentric reasons (humans are superior, animals are created for their use), others use theocentric reasons (divine recompense for the animals suffering in the hereafter) to justify the killing (Tlili 2015). She further finds that "medieval Islamic canonical texts express no preferences whatsoever for vegetarianism" (let alone veganism) (Tlili 2015), an attitude which echoes in even the most progressive contemporary scholarly texts on animal

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<sup>52</sup> Surah 5, verse 1: "O you who have believed, fulfill [all] contracts. Lawful for you are the animals of grazing livestock except for that which is recited to you [in this Qur'an] - hunting not being permitted while you are in the state of ihram. Indeed, Allah ordains what He intends." (Sahih International Translation)

<sup>53</sup> From the vegan perspective this obviously leaves the door wide open to question the killing of any animal as there is in the contemporary world hardly any need to kill animal for food in order to survive. Of course there are some exemptions on the local scale, as there are populations in regions where agriculture is impossible (for example Inuit), or a drought might leave villagers without grains or other food sources. These exemptions can be seen as the reason why there is no general prohibition against taking an animals life in the Qur'an or the prophetic Sunnah, as they are understood to be applicable by all people at all times. However on a global scale these exemptions are negligible, while in the Islamic world they can be seen as void by the possibilities and benefits of trade and aid.

rights in Islam (see Furber 2017). This signifies the need of an unmediated engagement with primary sources on the path to a new *fiqh* (jurisprudence), as demanded by Foltz (2001) and Hakim (2017b), that includes a strong focus on animal rights. The need to justify killing of animals in the classical texts is interpreted as evidence for a certain underlying discomfort, which seems rooted in the recognition by the scholars of the notion of *hurma* (inviolability) of living beings (Tlili 2015, 242). This discomfort can be amplified by insisting on the fact that eating animals is in most places not necessary for human survival. Proponents of 'Islamic Veganism' will need to convincingly address the fact that the practice of eating meat and animal products lacks legitimacy, as the need to circumvent the inviolability of living beings is actually not a given, if their efforts to influence the decisions of Muslims are to be successful.

The following statement of 'Aishu Bubu' (continued from above) is one example of how this could be done. Her argument focuses on the individual responsibility and accountability of each Muslim for their decisions and actions. It is a powerful call to reflect upon habits, taking into consideration the wider effects of personal consumption patterns. Her successful plea addressed to fellow believers signifies the potential of generating a wider cultural shift through vegan advocacy work:

YOU as a MUSLIM are accountable for your deeds – even if you are going vegan won't necessarily change the world (for now), how will you be able to stand in front of Allah on the day of judgement and justify in taking part in this injustice? In the torture and rape of animals, in so many species going extinct, in the destruction of nature, suffering of the poor, etc.? those animals, those people you have wronged, will all stand in front of you on yaim al qiyama [yaum al-qiyama – day of judgement, in which to believe is integral part of the Muslim faith] and testify against you! Are you willing to play with your afterlife, just to please your own taste buds, own

fancy leather items or apply make-up tested on animals without an excuse? Even though you had all these cruelty-free options as alternatives in front of you?

Alhamdulillah my sister and mum went vegan [heart image]. and my dad is transitioning (or at least trying his best)” (continued comment by ‘Aishu Bubu’ in *Vegan Muslim Community*, August 14, 2018)

## **b) Islamic Veganism**

Abu Musa reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said: ‘You will not be true believers until you are merciful to one another.’ They said: ‘O, Messenger of God, we are all merciful!’ He said: ‘It is not that you should be merciful to each other, but you should also be merciful in general. (Reported by Al-Tabarani, No. 1322)

Whoever has not been merciful to God’s creatures, does not deserve His Mercy. (Prophet Muhammad, pbuh, reported in Abu Dawud, no. 4921)

Above sayings of the Prophet Muhammad could be seen to support the argument that an *adab* (Islamic ethics) approach would be better suited to transform human-nonhuman relationships than a focus on legal issues (Keshani 2015). While I am not inclined to refute this argument, it is obvious that the shari’a offers ample opportunity to implement animal rights and increase animal welfare (see Furber 2017). What is most helpful in my opinion is a dual approach. Strict application of Islamic rules and regulations paired with a deeper engagement with Islamic values, as the rationale behind and the motivation beyond the rules, will leave a plant-based diet as only option for a sizeable number of Muslims. This would affect primarily large urban populations, whose consumption of meat, eggs and dairy is not a physiological necessity but a destructive cultural want. The almost exclusive focus in the halal/haram debate on the right slaughter method and procedure (Wood 2015) excludes all other

factors of the equation and is thus useless in determining which foods are actually permissible and which are not. Furber's discussion of classical Islamic juristic texts shows the potential to implement shari'a rules in the animal agriculture is underutilized (Furber 2015). His subsequent critique of contemporary industry can serve as a fundament for vegan advocacy, despite his critical stance towards a completely vegetarian diet (Furber 2017).

'Islamic Veganism' is a project, a discourse, about the application of justice and compassion in one's daily life, based on a contextual reading of the Quran and the hadith as the primary sources for Islamic tradition.<sup>54</sup> It promotes a personal, unmediated engagement with these texts, while it aims at influencing public opinion and policy frameworks.<sup>55</sup> While not all vegan Muslims share the same understanding of Islamic concepts like khalifa, I propose that 'Islamic Veganism' endorse a non-anthropocentric interpretation as shared by the earliest community and convincingly argued for by Tlili (2012). It is of course not guaranteed that this would lead automatically to less destruction and exploitation. Yet debunking the idea of human supremacy is more aligned with the Quranic message (Tlili 2012) and bears the potential to produce humbler and more respectful individuals, who can live in equilibrium with nature and its nonhuman inhabitants. Further, as the connection between patriarchy (here understood as the belief in male supremacy and the resulting social, political, and economical structures) is closely linked to the objectification and exploitation of animals as noted by Adams (1990, 2017) it seems necessary to adopt a critical stance towards it too. Islamic Veganism promotes animal rights and demands their protection in accordance with shari'a. The aim of this discourse I argue should be a practical one with a focus on providing information to Muslims in order

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<sup>54</sup> 'Islamic Veganism' could be part of the next wave of Islamic revivalism, born not out of the crisis of colonialism and modernism like the revivalism of the last century, but one born in the context of looming ecological collapse as well as a human health epidemic and an unprecedented quality and quantity of cruelty towards animals.

<sup>55</sup> One major difficulty of this approach is the issue of translations, given that the vast majority of Muslims does not read and/or understand Quranic Arabic. Standard translations are without a doubt biased towards standard interpretations. The engagement with the text must thus be a critical one, if one is to avoid blindly adopting and following hierarchical ideas expressed in translations like anthropocentrism, patriarchy and monarchism.

to trigger changes in behaviour of the kind demanded by Ripple *et al* (2017). The hope of this project would ultimately be to aid the transformation of human-nonhuman relationships across Muslim and non-Muslim societies and contribute to the preservation of the environment as well as to the wellbeing of its inhabitants.

The risk of this project is of course that influential orthodox scholars dismiss it as ‘western-influenced’ and thus invalid philosophy, and consequently rejected by Muslims in Muslim societies. A small number of Islamic scholars do engage with veganism but limit their discussion about the permissibility of such a lifestyle. However, the question whether veganism is permissible in Islam is answered (see chapter 1). Instead of apologetically justifying veganism, many vegan Muslims (for example Elysia Ward and Sammer Hakim from the *Vegan Muslim Initiative*, Nausheen, ‘TheVeganMuslim’, and ‘Aishu Bubū’) deliver a profound critique about what is un-Islamic in contemporary food production and consumption. Factory farming is not halal, as Furber recognizes (2017). Neither is the destruction of rainforests to raise cattle for beef or grow animal feed (Furber 2017). The knowledge and intuition of vegan Muslims needs to be presented to both key players in Muslim societies as well as introduced to the public. In this way they can contribute to the fight for animal rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice, and further increase piety.

Yet vegan Muslims with an interest to spread their ideals, who engage in animal rights advocacy or who aim to create a normative vegan interpretation of Islam, need to be aware of the selectivity amongst Muslims when it comes to accepting guidance (Chaudhry 2017). Even the creation of an Islamic animal rights charter, as envisioned by Masri and Haque (2011), would not automatically lead a majority of Muslims to accept it (Foltz 2014). While proponents of multiple normative interpretations of Islamic sources strive for followers (Chaudhry 2017), these have the option to choose from the interpretation which suits them best. Muslim advocates of veganism would argue that those who follow their call will benefit themselves in the short-, medium-, and long-term and

create positive change for others. Whether their calls will be answered by enough individuals to create a significant cultural shift in Muslim societies or whether 'Islamic Veganism' will continue to thrive as a subculture with a distinct philosophy remains to be seen.

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