"This is Improper and Irreligious": Navigation of Queer Sexuality, Religion, and Practice in Marwan Hamed's Film *Imarat Yácubyan* and Abdellah Taïa's Novel *Une Mélancolie Arabe*

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the negotiation of queer sexuality in Arab-Muslim societies of North Africa. Through close analysis and reading of the film *Imarat Yácubyan* by Marwan Hamed (Egypt) and the novel *Une Mélancolie Arabe* by Abdellah Taïa (Morocco), this article examines how media makes it possible to understand how Muslims in North Africa negotiate their sexuality, religion, and practice against backgrounds in which queerness exists in silence and marginality. The selected film and novel demonstrate that Islam is, in fact, a sensuous and queer religion. Designating Islam as queer gestures towards the possibility of imagining non-normative sexualities exiting within and being compatible with the religion. In their different iterations of the intersection of queerness and the practice of Islam, *Imarat Yácubyan* and *Une Mélancolie Arabe* open new spaces for understanding Islam and, specifically, what it means to be queer, Arab, and Muslim within the sociocultural context of North African countries.

KEYWORDS
Islam, North Africa, queer, religion, sexuality

Introduction

Whenever the intersection of religion and sexuality is evoked, especially in Africa, it is often in relation to Christianity. There is a robust body of scholarship that focuses on the role of Christianity in fashioning queer lived experiences in Africa[1], how Christian mores have impacted present-day unaccommodating and homophobic laws[2], and how Christianity has been

1 See Cheryl Stobie, "The Devil Slapped on the Genitals: Religion and Spirituality in Queer South Africans' Lives." *Journal of Literary Studies* 30, no. 1 (2014): 1-19; Megan Robertson, "Queerying Scholarship on Christianity and Queer Sexuality: Reviewing Nuances and New Directions." *African Journal of Gender and Religion 23, no. 2* (2017): 1-20.

2 See Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies: The Basics*. (London: Routledge, 2019).

used to fan homophobia on the continent.[3] This inordinate focus on Christianity has unwittingly marginalized other religions. In this article, I contribute to on-going discussions that decenter Christianity and consider other religions, especially in how they enable or foil queer lived experiences on the African continent.

If there is a solid body of scholarship that has focused on the intersection of Christianity and queerness,[4] Islam has certainly been othered in queer studies.[5] (The Western foundations of queer studies and its "collusions with (Western) modalities of secularism"[6] can explain this othering of Islam from the broad field of queer studies and the more specialized field of queer African studies. According to Khan, Western sexual exceptionalism has ensured that the West is framed as "exceptionally tolerant to homosexuality". The rest of the world, the "West's Other" locates "homophobia outside of liberal modernity". In this orientalist othering, Islam has been depicted as traditionalist, if not extremist and terrorist. Islam is thus framed as antagonistic to the liberal values represented by the West. One of my objectives in this article is to demonstrate that Islam is not the backward

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3 See Adriaan Van Klinken, and Ezra Chitando. "Introduction: Public Religion, Homophobia and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa." in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando. (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-16; Adriaan Van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa*. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

4 As I use the terms queer and queerness in this article, I am aware that these are terms that are invested in Western modes of thinking and that, in many instances, cannot be applied to understand non-Western ways of being. This is, of course, an argument that has been raised by many scholars. Massad (2007) contends through what he terms the "gay international" that Western modes of thought have been imposed on non-Western contexts. Van Klinken (2019, 8) has warned against what he refers to as "traveling theories", referring to "theories developed in the so-called global North, informed by Western epistemologies and traditions of thought, that are being introduced and applied to contexts in the so-called global South". Despite these issues raised against the use of nomenclature informed by Western nomenclature, I use the term "queer" to speak to gender and sexual identities that contest heteronormative ideas of what and how gender and sexuality should be practiced and performed.

5 Gibson Ncube, and Adriaan Van Klinken, "Abdellah Taïa and an Emergent Queer African Islamic Discourse: Texts, Visibility and Intimate Archives." *African Studies* (in-press).

6 Abeera Khan, "Queer Secularity." *lambda Nordica* 25, no. 1 (2020): 133-139.

other. Rather, I illustrate that Muslim societies practice tolerance towards non-conforming sexualities.

This article examines the negotiation of queerness within predominantly Arab-Muslim societies of North Africa. I use a film and a novel as entry points to understanding what it means to be queer, Arab, and Muslim within the specific sociocultural space of North Africa. Although the selected film and novel are works of fiction, they nevertheless offer fascinating representations of the lived experiences that play out in the Arab-Muslim societies of Egypt and Morocco. Literary texts and films play a central role in rendering queerness not only visible but also public. Works of fiction have been pivotal in articulating the movement from the tolerance of private queerness to the current situation in which queerness is visible in the public sphere. As queerness has become increasingly visible, it has been enmeshed in other contemporary issues, such as radical Islam, Islamophobia, human rights, as well as the politics of neo-colonialism.[7] Despite the similar work that novels and films undertake in making queer sexualities and identities visible, I argue that films have a far greater potential of making queer bodies visible and legible. Despite these differences between novels and films, I ground my close readings of these media within existing scholarly work in religious studies and sociology. My intention is to demonstrate that the representations offered by the selected film and novel articulate lived realities in the countries of Egypt and Morocco.

Although it was previously argued that Abrahamic religions are not compatible with non-normative sexualities[8], recent scholarship has shown that non-normative sexualities and Abrahamic religions are far from incompatible, both historically and today.[9] The film *Imarat Yácubyan* (The Yacoubian Building) and the novel *Une Mélancolie Arabe* (An Arab Melancholia) demonstrate that there is, in fact, a general tolerance of non-normative sexual and gender identities even within communities of Muslim

7 See Momin Rahman, "Contemporary Same-Sex Muslim Sexualities: Identities and Issues." in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, eds. Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward. (Cham: Springer, 2018), 1-21.

8 See Easterman, Daniel. "The erection is Eternal. (Muslims and Sex)." *New Stateman & Society* 239, no. 6 (1993): 26-29.

9 See Pikria Meladze, and Jac Brown, "Religion, sexuality, and internalized homonegativity: Confronting cognitive dissonance in the Abrahamic religions." *Journal of religion and health* 54, no. 5 (2015): 1950-62.

faith. Among the different stories that *Imarat Yácubyan* recounts, it focuses on the lives of two men: Hatem Rasheed, an effeminate man who owns a French-language newspaper in Cairo and Abd Raboo, an impoverished police officer who has a sexual relationship with Hatem for money. *Une Mélancolie Arabe* tells the story of the challenges of growing up gay in an unaccommodating town in Morocco. In my reading of *Imarat Yácubyan* and *Une Mélancolie Arabe,* I show that the body is central in how queerness is negotiated and how Islam in the two North African countries is challenged. Overall, I make two interventions in this article. First, I investigate the ways in which media (films and novels) represent the intersection between queerness and Islam. Second, I explore, through my analysis of the selected film and novel, the ambivalence and negotiation of queerness and religion that demonstrates how everyday Muslims in North Africa navigate their understanding of sexuality, faith, and practice, opening new spaces for understanding Islam.

The intersection of Islam and queer in North Africa

AbuKhalil explains the methodological hazards that go hand in hand with a study of Islam:

> The tendency to speak about Islam is fraught with methodological hazards. First, the religion does not apply uniformly or universally to all Muslims and in all areas of the world. That Islam constitutes a closed, inflexible doctrine, or that all world Muslims form some monolithic bloc, is no more accepted by the academic community despite the efforts of stubborn orientalists who never give up on their attempt to revive the crudest version of classical orientalism.[10]

As I undertake this study of Islam in North Africa, I am fully aware of these dangers and risks. I am particularly cognizant that North Africa offers a sociocultural space for the practice of Islam. Even within North Africa, the practice of Islam is evidently heterogenous.[11] In Egypt, most Muslims

[10] As'ad AbuKhalil, "Gender Boundaries and Sexual Categories in the Arab World." *Feminist Issues* 15, no. 1/2 (1997): 91-104.

[11] See Gibson Ncube, La Sexualité Queer au Maghreb à travers la Littérature. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018).

adhere to Sunni Islam. Modern day Egypt, postures as a secular state. This has had a significant impact on the public practice of Islam in the country.[12] In contrast, Sufism is the dominant form of Islam practiced in Morocco. One of the most important characteristics of the Sufi expression of Islam is the concept of "baraka". According to Cornell, "baraka" has different meanings, including "a spiritual force", "scared virtue", and also "luck".[13] Moreover, saints play a central role in the Moroccan expression of Sufism. In fact, the expression of Islam in Morocco is infused with mysticism in such a way that believers have direct communication with God without the need of an intermediary. Gaudio argues that the "flexible notions of morality" that are enabled by Sufism have engendered "the relative tolerance" of non-normative sexualities.[14]

Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging that this part of the African continent practices Islam in tandem with colonial penal codes that draw principally on largely Christian morals. Historically, as argued by Kugle,[15] Arab-Muslim societies were generally tolerant of non-normative sexualities. Christian mores, in contrast, were not as tolerant and set out to limit and restrain local sexual practices. This confluence of Islam and Christianity has produced a complex sociocultural milieu in which non-normative sexualities exist and are tolerated, yet simultaneously marginalized. Despite this complex situation, Islam generally has a more permitting position to human sexuality compared to other monotheistic religions.[16] For Easterman, Christian traditions have always been uneasy with human sexuality and have repeatedly emphasized the dichotomy between the carnal and the spiritual.[17] Easterman argues that in Christianity and Judaism, sexuality has often been removed from the religious realm by framing it as antithetical to spirituality. Islam, contrarily, is a realm of sensuality and, what Thompson

12 Fauzi Najjar, "The Debate on Islam and Secularism in Egypt." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1996): 1-21.

13 Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 25.

14 Rudolf Gaudio, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 124.

15 Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

16 Jean-Pierre Digard, "La Sexualité en Islam." *L'Homme* 16, no. 4 (1976): 157-59.

17 Daniel Easterman, "The Erection Is Eternal Muslims and Sex." *New Stateman & Society* 239, no. 6 (1993): 26-9.

terms, "intercorporeality" and "affective solidarity".[18] Within Islam, the sacred and the sensual seem to be inextricably linked.[19] Speaking on the place of sex and sexuality in Abrahamic religions, AbuKhalil clarifies that Christianity, in particular, has preached a particular sense of puritanical morality and strict ethical code while scorning Islam for its permissiveness regarding human sex and sexuality.[20]

Although Islam appears to be more permissive in as far as human sexuality is concerned, discussions of sexuality remain shrouded in silence, particularly for queer sexualities. According to Serhane, such silence speaks to how Arab-Muslim societies try to give the impression that queer sexualities do not exist.[21] It is as if the silence forces queer sexualities to become invisible and, thus, non-existent. Muslims have a complex relationship with queer sexualities. For example, Kligerman shows that in Arab-Muslim societies, queerness is not necessarily an identity marker, as is the case in Western world. According to Kligerman, a married man can engage in sexual intercourse with another man if he is able to keep up appearances and present himself as a respectable husband and father.[22] Wockner concurs and explains that what is most important in these societies is the notion of family.[23] In other words, queer sexuality is generally accepted, or at least tolerated, especially male queer sexuality. This suggests that if a married man fulfils his familial duties and conjugal obligations, he can do as he pleases. It is, however, imperative that a man who engages in sex with another man does so surreptitiously.

It should also be pointed out that although there is a general tolerance of non-normative sexualities in Muslim societies, public queerness was and

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18 Katrina Daly Thompson, "Making Space for Embodied Diverse Bodies, and Multiple Gender in Nonconformist Friday Prayers: A Queer Feminist Ethnography of Progressive Muslims' Performative Intercorporeality in North American Congregations." *American Anthropology,* 122, no. 4 (2020): 876-890.

19 Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *La Sexualité en Islam*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979).

20 AbuKhalil, "Gender Boundaries and Sexual Categories in the Arab World", 99.

21 Abdelhak Serhane, *L'Amour Circoncis*. (Casablanca: Éditions Eddif, 1995).

22 Nicole Kligerman, "Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox." Macalester Islam Journal 2, no. 3 (2007): 50-64.

23 Rex Wockner, "Homosexuality in the Arab and Moslem World." in *Coming Out*, ed. Stephan Likosky (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 103-16.

remains intolerable. Public expression of a queer identity is seen as destabilizing the sanctity and the values of the heteronormative family.

The incompatibility of Islam and queer embodiment in *Imarat Yácubyan*

The main characters in *Imarat Yácubyan* approach their sexuality in diametrically opposed ways. Hatem Rasheed, because of his class and level of education seems to be more confident in his queer sexual identity. The first time Hatem meets Abd Rabbo, the two are on the streets. It is at night and Hatem is taking a walk. He sees Abd and asks him if he knows where a particular road is found. It becomes obvious that Hatem asked for directions as a pretext to speak to Abd. As they continue speaking, Hatem asks the young police officer what his name is and invites him to walk with him. The way the camera focuses on his face and the happiness it exhibits, makes it clear that Hatem is attracted to Abd though this attraction is never verbalized. However, their bodies appear to express and perform this attraction. For example, in several instances, Hatem touches Abd's hands and shoulders. These ephemeral touches and stolen glances express intimacy even if no words are spoken to describe it. Hatem then offers Abd some money and tells him that he likes to make people happy. This is a very ambiguous statement and Ncube clarifies in his analysis of this film that "this ambiguous language serves to suggest Hatem's queerness without him having to verbally state that he is interested in men".[24] Up to this point, though it is that Hatem is interested in and attracted to men, Abd is presented as a virile young man who does not present any hints of queerness.

The next time that the two meet, we see them in a bar. Although it is not evident to Abd that this is a gay bar, the camera's horizontal panoramic movement shows that only men are in this space. As they drink, Hatem uses the ambiguous language that he employed in the previous scene. Again, he tells Abd that he wants to make him happy and tells him that "after you have another drink, you will find out you want to do delicious things, the most delicious things in life". Abd quickly realizes that the "delicious things" that Hatem is referring to is in fact sexual intercourse. Abd tries to deflect the attention on himself by saying that he is unable to experience "delicious

[24] Gibson Ncube, *Queer Bodies in African Films*. (Makhanda: NISC, 2022), 49.

things" at that moment because his wife is in the rural areas. To this statement, Hatem retorts, "must you do it with your wife? Most women aren't that nice". Abd is obviously stunned by these words. Oblivious to Abd's discomfort, Hatem slips his hand under the table and begins to touch and stroke Abd's crotch. Abd reacts by kicking the table and leaving the bar. Once they are outside, Abd is quick to declare that what Hatem has done goes against Islam: "This is improper and irreligious! Heaven and earth shake because of it!" Abd is a devout Muslim and, for him, queer eroticism goes against the religious precepts that dictate his behavior.
Despite Abd's initial shock and disgust, as the plot unfolds, he willingly engages in sexual intercourse with Hatem, stating that he needs the money he gets from Hatem to take care of his family. In one scene, after the two have been intimate, Hatem finds Abd crying and claiming that he is afraid of God's punishment. Hatem asks why he fears punishment as if he has done something wrong. To this, Abd responds:

> I heard a sheikh talking about the punishment of Lot's people. We're shaking the throne of heaven and earth; we're causing an earthquake. Everything I do with you is wrong! Liquor day and night, sex… I even quit praying!

In the two instances above where Abd talks about heaven and earth shaking as well as causing an earthquake, he appears to be indirectly referencing Sūrah az-Zalzalah (the ninety-nineth chapter of the Quran) that talks about the judgement day. The Sūrah states:

> [1] When the earth is shaken with its final earthquake
> [2] And the earth discharges its burdens
> [3] And man says, "What is wrong with it?"
> [4] That Day, it will report its news
> [5] Because you Lord has commanded it
> [6] That Day, people will proceed in separate groups to be shown the consequences of their deeds
> [7] So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it
> [8] And whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it.

This Sūrah states that on the final day every person will see and be judged for all their earthly deeds. Abd is terrified of the prospect of being judged for

having sex with Hatem. Notably. Abd appears more scared of this final judgement rather than the sexual act itself. In this evocation of the final judgement, Abd focuses on the vengeful side of God. Hatem is aware of this and, in response to Abd's impassioned pleas shaking heaven and earth, tries to evoke God's merciful side by asking: "what is wrong if a man loves another man? God is very generous and merciful". Hatem further states:

> Our Lord is big and He has true mercy, nothing to do with what the ignorant sheikhs in your village say. . . I'm sure that our lord will forgive us because we don't do anyone any harm. We just love one another.

Hatem suggests that there is nothing wrong with them having sex because they are causing no harm to anyone. This exchange between the men highlights two opposing viewpoints. First, Abd's belief that queer sexuality is in no way compatible with Islam. where engaging in same-sex relations is wrong and, therefore, punishable on the day of judgment. This thinking is based on the two Sūrahs in the Quran that refer to Lot's people and to intercourse between people of the same sex. As argued by Kugle, the Quran itself does not forbid non-normative sexuality.[25] It is rather secondary texts such as the hadith that are used to interpret the Sūrah in such a way. Hendrick explains in this regard that the hadith contains numerous contradictions and discrepancies and concludes that "it is no surprise that hate crimes against homosexuals, including the justification for their execution, stems largely from the *hadith".*[26] Abd's reason focuses on a strict adherence to the letter and spirit of the Quran. To be a good Muslim, he must not engage in activities that go against the injunctions of the Quran. Second, Hatem's evocation of the idea of God's generosity and mercy attempts to find what Wafer terms a "theological accommodation"[27] of queerness. This search for "theological accommodation" of queerness rests on the notion of God being charitable and benevolent. For Hatem, being a

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25 Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, 99.

26 Muhsin Hendricks, "Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society." *The Equal Rights Review* 5 (2010), 33.

27 Jim Wafer, "Muhammad and male homosexuality." In *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, eds. *Will* Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray. (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 87-96.

good Muslim means more than blindly following what is said in the Quran. Being a good Muslim involves acknowledging the mercifulness of God. In Hatem's thinking, God's mercy means that even if he engages in sexual activities that are considered sinful, he will find forgiveness from God. This insistence on the mercy of God is Hatem's attempt at "reinterpreting doctrine and emphasizing aspects of Islam that promote inclusion, peace, tolerance, and justice".[28] This is, of course, diametrically opposed to Abd's vision in which queerness and Islam are not harmonious. For Abd, he cannot be both at the same time, which is why he stops praying when he begins his relationship with Hatem. For Abd, it is unimaginable to pray and be good Muslim while simultaneously having sex with another man.

The opposing views of Abd and Hatem on the intersection of queerness and Islam highlight two qualities of God: God the compassionate and God the wrathful. On the one hand, Abd, due to his fear of punishment, focuses on the wrath of God. On the other hand, Hatem concentrates on God's quality as compassionate and merciful.

Despite their different perspectives on what it means to be queer (or at least to engage in queer sex) and be Muslim, both men must deal with deep-seated shame, guilt, and fear of divine punishment, however, they do so differently. For example, Hatem is seen in numerous scenes to excessively wash his body. It is as if, through this disproportionate cleansing of the body, he is attempting to purge himself of the shame he feels when he has sex with men. For Abd, the shame originates from a sense of emasculation from engaging in sexual activity with a man. To assert his masculinity, he is violent towards his wife. In one scene, he forces himself on her and rapes her.

The relationship between Hatem and Abd ends when the latter's son dies. Abd views this to be divine punishment and retribution for having had sex with a man and, thereby, defiled not just the sacredness of his body but also the sanctity of his marriage and ultimately the holiness of Islam. Through its focus on Hatem and Abd's relationship, *Imarat Yácubyan* illustrates how queer sexuality is negotiated in a Muslim context. While Abd embodies the

[28] Omar Minwalla, BR Simon Rosser, Jamie Feldman, and Christine Varga. "Identity Experience among Progressive Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study within Al-Fatiha." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (2005): 113-128.

kinds of internal contradictions that queer Muslims face and must negotiate, Hatem highlights the endeavors by queer Muslim to question Islam a way that allows for religious accommodation and tolerance of non-normative sexualities. Such accommodation is found through the acknowledgement of God as being benevolent and merciful and seeing beyond the notion of God being simply vengeful.

Islam as queer and corporeal in Abdellah Taïa's *Une Mélancolie Arabe*

Abdellah Taïa's *Une Mélancolie Arabe* (2008) is a semi-autobiographical novel which traces the life of the protagonist-narrator, Abdellah. Abdellah grows up in a very religious family and community. At a very early age, he realizes that he is attracted to men. This awareness begins with an almost incestuous attraction to his older brother. The novel traces how the protagonist struggles to harmonizes his sexuality and his religious convictions and his desire to be a good Muslim. To examine this struggle, I consider two pivotal scenes in the novel. The first depicts a time when a group of boys want to rape Abdellah. The second sees Abdellah living in Paris after having left Morocco. A relationship that he has with a Moroccan man leads him to question Islam.

In the town Abdellah grew up, effeminate boys were often targeted by older boys who were sexually frustrated. Because of the strict separation of boys and girls to safeguard the virginity of girls, effeminate boys were abused by older boys. *Une Mélancolie Arabe* describes such a scene where Abdellah is chased by five older boys and is cornered in a derelict building. This group of boys includes Chouaïb, a boy Abdellah had developed feelings for. Once in this building, the five boys strip naked with the intention of taking turns to rape Abdellah. At that moment, they hear the voice of the muezzin's call to prayer. All the boys can do is to stand, confused and cover their penises:

> *Il était visiblement un bon musulman. Il craignait Dieu. Respectait le prophète Mohamed. Il n'allait pas tout mélanger quand même. Le sexe et Dieu ? Ce n'était pas possible. Chaque chose en son temps. Dieu, malgré le peu de clarté qui régnait dans la pièce, nous*

> *regardait. Cinq garçons nus, leur sexe dur et mou, entre les mains. Et un sixième, nu et ambigu, qu'on s'apprêtait à sacrifier.*[29]

[He was obviously a good Muslim. He feared God. He respected the prophet Mohamed. He wasn't going to mix it up though. Sex and God? That was not possible. Everything in its own time. God, despite the lack of light in the room, was watching us. Five naked boys, their hard and wet penises in their hands. And a sixth, naked and ambiguous, who was about to be sacrificed].[30]

Chouaïb and the other boys do not go ahead with their plansto rape Abdellah because they did not want to mix sex and God. Like Abd in *Imarat Yácubyan*, the boys felt that it was improper to have sex with Abdellah at a moment they were expected to be praying. For these boys, God and queer sex (consensual or not) could not occupy the same space and time. If queer sex was to take place, it could not do so in the palpable presence of God during the time of prayer. Abdellah, in this moment, shared similar sentiments as Chouaïb and the other boys. He believed in being a good Muslim and feared what his queerness would do:

> *J'étais un bon musulman moi aussi. Je me sentais sincèrement comme tel à l'époque. J'avais peur de Dieu, de l'enfer, de la souffrance dans la tombe. Des mauvais anges. J'aimais le Prophète, son histoire et ses légendes. Avec ma mère, j'aimais aussi les saints et leur mausolée.*[31]
> [I was a good Muslim too. I sincerely felt like one at that time. I was afraid of God, of hell, of suffering in the grave. The evil angels. I loved the Prophet, his story, and his legends. With my mother, I also loved the saints and their mausoleums].

Like Abd in *Imarat Yácubyan,* Abdellah is convinced that his queerness is incompatible with his religious beliefs. He could not be a good Muslim and be queer: *"je ne mélangeais pas Dieu et le sexe. Le pur et l'impur. J'aimais les deux. Séparément*"[32] (I did not mix God and sex. The pure and the

[29] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*. (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 27.
[30] This and other translations in this article are my own.
[31] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 27.
[32] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 27.

impure. I loved both. Separately). It is notable how Abdellah frames God against queer sex. God represented purity where, in contrast, queer sex and queerness represented impurity. Although he loved God and cherished his sexual identity, he felt that he could not do both simultaneously. He could not concurrently be queer and be a good Muslim. Given the difficulty of harmonizing the opposing demands of his religion and his sexuality, Abdellah decides to abandon God so that he can fully embrace his sexual identity: "*Plus rien ne serait comme avant. Dieu n'existait plus, j'en avais l'intime conviction à ce moment-là. J'étais maudit. Maudit. Maudit*"[33] [Nothing would ever be the same again. God no longer existed, I was intimately convinced of it at that moment. I was cursed. Cursed. Cursed].

When Abdellah moves to France, his sexuality is not an issue. Although he was far from his home country of Morocco, he, nevertheless, felt the need to have some sort of communion with God: "*j'avais besoin de parler à quelqu'un, de me confier, me confesser, trouver une oreille charitable*"[34] [I needed to speak to someone, to confide in someone, to confess to someone, to find a charitable ear]. In France, Abdellah falls in love with a Moroccan man called Slimane and the two have a relationship. Interestingly, his lover had also been a devout Muslim before this relationship. However, once in a relationship with Abdellah, he attempts to move away from the formal practice of Islam:

> *Tu aimais aller à la mosquée de temps en temps. Tu disais que tu aimais la gymnastique de la prière, être au milieu des inconnus en prière, dans la parole simple et directe avec Dieu. Dès qu'on s'est rencontrés, tu as arrêté de le faire. Tu n'osais plus. Notre lien était sacrilège aux yeux de l'islam. Tu n'arrivais pas à te débarrasser de ce sentiment. Je n'ai pas essayé de te faire changer d'avis. Moi-même je vivais dans cette contradiction. Moi-même j'avais besoin de croire. Je voulais croire*.[35]
>
> [You liked to go to the mosque from time to time. You said that you liked the gymnastics of prayer, being in the middle of strangers in prayer, in the simple and direct word with God. As soon as we met,

[33] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 97.
[34] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 65.
[35] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 133.

> you stopped doing it. You didn't dare. Our relationship was blasphemous in the eyes of Islam. You couldn't get rid of that feeling. I didn't try to change your mind. I myself was living in that contradiction. I myself needed to believe. I wanted to believe.]

Abdellah and Slimane are not able to practice their faith and simultaneously be queer and, consequently, decide to detach themselves from Islam. But deciding to detach themselves from the religion that they have been born to and they have practiced almost all their lives is not an easy task. Because of their need to practice some form religion or spirituality, the two decide to rethink their religious beliefs. They do this by practicing Islam within the space of Christian churches. Within the secular world of France, the churches are abandoned and seem to serve no purpose:

> *On a fini par trouver une solution. Je t'ai emmené à l'église Saint-Bernard et on a regardé les autres prier. Les églises, ce n'était pas pour nous à l'origine, cela ne représentait rien dans notre mémoire spirituelle. Rien ne nous attachait à elles et, pourtant, nous y sommes retournés plusieurs fois et nous avons fini par y découvrir une nouvelle spiritualité. Nous l'avons inventée ensemble, cette religion, cette foi, cette chapelle, ce coin sombre et lumineux, ce temps en dehors du temps*.[36]
> [Eventually, we found a solution. I took you to St. Bernard's Church and we watched the others pray. Churches were not for us at first, they represented nothing in our spiritual memory. Nothing attached us to them, and yet we went back several times and ended up discovering a new spirituality there. We invented it together, this religion, this faith, this chapel, this dark and luminous corner, this time outside of time.]

It is interesting that Abdellah and Slimane find solace in practicing their faith within the Christian churches. Within this space, Abdellah states that they were able to forge "*une religion sensuelle, sexuelle*"[37] [a religion that was at once sensuous and sexual]. Abdellah touches on the concept of "spiritual memory" that refers to the socio-religious conditioning that inscribes images

[36] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 134.
[37] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 99.

in the individual's psyche that are felt throughout their existence. For Abdellah, the image of the Christian church does not figure into his spiritual memory. The new form of religion that Abdellah and Slimane forge mixes elements of Islam and Christianity. In the emptiness of the Parisian churches, they find a space of spiritual comfort. It is within the confines of this excluded and dark space that the two lovers dare "*se redéfinir, dire tout, révéler tout et écrire tout. Même l'amour interdit. L'écrire avec un nouveau nom. Un nom digne. Un poème*"[38] [to redefine themselves, to say everything, to reveal everything and to write everything. Even forbidden love. To write it with a new name. A worthy name. A poem]. Within the churches of Paris, Abdellah and Slimane can give a new name to their lives. They can embrace their sexual identities and also practice their faith.

However, although Abdellah and Slimane forge a new form of religion that allows them to celebrate their love for each other, while they have sex that they both revert to the Islamic dogma they have been brought up with, which considers queerness as immoral. Their pseudo-religion cannot erase the guilt they feel about their sexuality: "*le sexe, dans ce cadre, était à chaque fois comme la première fois, une transgression, une rencontre au ciel*"[39] [sex, in this context, was each time like the first time, a transgression, a meeting in heaven]. To his great despair, Abdellah concludes that sex forces them to go back to their life before adopting their pseudo-religion, one of dismay: "*cela a duré un quart d'heure. Quinze minutes pour me salir, reprendre la vie d'avant toi, me reperdre, seul. Un seul moment insignifiant de sexe pour commettre un péché et sortir de notre religion, tourner le dos au Christ et à ses églises*"[40] [it only took fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes to feel dirty, to go back to the life before you, to lose myself again, alone. One insignificant moment of sex to commit a sin and to detach ourselves from our religion, turn my back on Christ and his churches]. Their new form of religiosity is unable to overcome the belief that queerness is a sin.

Une Mélancolie Arabe shows that it is possible to reconsider Islam. Through a nuanced dialogue with Christianity, the characters in the novel construct a spirituality that escapes the narrow conceptualizations of the intersection of

[38] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 110.
[39] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 133.
[40] Abdellah Taïa, *Une Mélancolie Arabe*, 137.

sex and spirituality offered by formal religions such as Islam and Christianity. The novel illustrates how Islam can be less rigid, allowing for an experience queerness that is free of guilt and shame. Indeed, by reading the Catholic churches as a form of religious enactment, it represents a type of expansion and reconsideration of the boundaries of Islam. This reconsideration of the boundaries of Islam marks a queering of the religion that highlights the possibility of queerness finding a place Islam.

Conclusion

When read alongside each other, *Imarat Yácubyan* and *Une Mélancolie Arabe* carve innovative paths to considering the intersection between Islam and queer sexuality, demonstrating how Muslims negotiate religion and its practice. The film and novel highlight the difficulties faced by queer Muslims in navigating the complexities involved in assuming a queer identity beyond the private space. They challenge monolithic interpretations of the Quran that are intertwined with cultural practices that make it difficult to be queer and Muslim.

In questioning Islam, the film and novel gesture towards innovative ways of forging new ways of practicing the Muslim faith, allowing for ways in which queerness is experienced without feelings of guilt or the fear of punishment come judgement day. Abdellah Taïa's novel, *Une Mélancolie Arabe,* illustrates how the protagonists can practice their faith outside the strictures of Islam by forging faith communities within the space of unused Christian cathedrals. This, itself, is an interesting examination of how Islam is practiced within and in relation to Christianity.

Both the novel and film clearly reveal that while it might be difficult to harmonize practicing Islam and being queer, it is possible to imagine new ways of understanding and practicing religion. Beyond the guilt, shame, and fear that undercut the negotiation of queerness within Muslim faith communities, the film and novel highlight how Islam is an expansive religion that has the capacity to allow queer individuals to assume their gender and sexual identities while simultaneously fulfilling the need to have a spiritual experience. The film and novel illustrate that, although there is a general tolerance of queerness that is practiced in private, public queerness remains intolerable because of the difficult questions that such visibility engenders.

Visible queerness has the potential to disturb the cohesion of society and especially the heteropatriarchal conceptualization of the family.

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