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Just a Cup of Tea? Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Activism and the Gendered Politics of Representation

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Abstract

During the past 15 years, there has been a rapid increase in interfaith initiatives in the United Kingdom. Even though the "interfaith industry," as some have cynically called it, has rapidly increased, the involvement of women in these groups has been relatively low. Based on ethnographic data, including 20 interviews and 3 years of fieldwork with female interfaith activists in the United Kingdom (2017–2020), this ethnography focuses on the emergence of Jewish and Muslim female interfaith initiatives, analyzing the creative ways religious women negotiate their challenges and struggles as women of faith, together. I examine the ways Jewish and Muslim women form nuanced representations of female piety that disrupt "strictly observant" gendered representations, thus diversifying the binary categories of what being Jewish, or Muslim, entails. Further, whereas former studies have focused on interfaith settings as crucial for the construction of religious identities, I show that interfaith activism also serves as a site for religious minorities to learn how to become British citizens. In a highly politicized Britain, where allegations of racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia prevail, I argue that Jewish-Muslim encounters are sites for the construction and performances of British civic citizenship well beyond the prescriptions of the state. Drawing on these findings, I situate interfaith activism at the anthropological intersection of gender, religion, and citizenship, and as a site that reproduces and disrupts minority-state relationality.

Keywords

minority politics, gender, Judaism, Islam, interfaith, United Kingdom

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Introduction

On a cold winter day, a diverse group of 300 Jewish and Muslim women gathered for a female Jewish-Muslim interfaith conference in central London. A series of interfaith lectures presented different ways to be active allies amid growing Islamophobia and antisemitism[1] in the United Kingdom, which spoke to the diverse intentions of the women in the room. When it was time for lunch, women wishing to pray made their way to a side room on the second floor, where a joint prayer session was scheduled to take place. After the Muslim women finished *wudhu* (the Islamic practice of cleansing before prayer), everyone entered the room set up with Muslim prayer rugs on one side and Jewish prayer books on the other. As the Jewish women picked up their prayer books, the Muslim women started to assemble around the prayer rugs. Even though both Muslim and Jewish women were ready to pray, all the women stood fiddling around in awkward silence. Why were not they beginning? I wondered. Finally, one of the Muslim women asked the question that seemed to be stalling the joint prayer session—"Are we doing this as individuals or collectively"? As most of the women in the room were used to male-led prayers, they were not sure whether their coming together required a female *Muezzin* or *hazaneet* (Arabic and Hebrew for female cantor, respectively) or rather they should pray as individuals standing side by side.

The women started looking at each other until someone mumbled quietly: "Is someone willing to lead?" Sahar, one of the Muslim women laughed and said she would be happy to lead. "I can't do this at my mosque; I might as well start it here." Smiling at Sahar, Sarah, too, moved to the front of the room and opened up her prayer book. Exchanging another smile, they both directed themselves together toward Mecca and Jerusalem, respectively, and began to recite their afternoon prayers—*Field notes, March 2018, London.*

This vignette demonstrates a unique moment of Jewish and Muslim women taking command of their own religious practices through a shared exchange of faith during a day of interfaith activism. As there are no men present, the prayer session begins with a moment of uncertainty as in most Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities, it is typically men who lead prayers. A public assembly of women complicates this status quo and the question immediately emerges—"Should we do this collectively or individually?" Out of this confusion, an opportunity materializes to try something these women would not have been able to do in their home communities—lead in prayer. The question: "are we individuals or a collective" is a telling one as it reflects their marginality in their main communities regarding prayers. Within this context of gender marginality, this female-only interfaith setting creates a unique space to reconfigure sacred practices and (learn to) lead religious rituals together. Interfaith gathering, thus, is not only about learning about "Others," it enables new Jewish and Muslim experiences in a space marked by multiple marginalities. But it doesn't end there.

Based on ethnographic data, including 20 interviews and 3 years of fieldwork with female interfaith activists in the United Kingdom (2017–2020), I found that interfaith activism serves as a node for the cultivation of female leadership. While interfaith initiatives have tended to focus on theology, the shift toward social action in recent

years has had immediate ramifications for women, as it has allowed a renewed entry point for female leadership vis-à-vis the earlier theological agenda that was predominately led by (white) men. At these gatherings women seek to focus on their similar marginality, bridging gaps through friendship, while eating, praying, learning sacred texts, or engaging in social action together as they search for creative ways to bring forward a better future.

While much scholarship has shown how interfaith settings are crucial for the construction of religious identities, I found that interfaith activism also serves as a site for religious minorities to learn how to become British citizens. In a highly politicized Britain, where allegations of racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia prevail, I argue that Jewish-Muslim encounters are sites for the construction and performances of British citizenship well beyond the prescriptions of the state. Further, whereas scholarship on gender, citizenship, and religion has typically built on contestations between one religious community and the state (Asad, 2003; Bowen, 2016; Fernando, 2014), my approach highlights how women from two marginalized groups create alliances to disrupt and put forward alternative representations of non-Christian religious women in the Christian-dominated[2] British public sphere. Whether countering hegemonic representations of head coverings or simply having a cup of tea together, these acts of resistance trouble binary categories of religion/politics and private/public. Ethnographic accounts of minority alliance building, thus, prove to be fruitful sites to think about resistance to the state. Situating interfaith activism as a site that reproduces and disrupts minority-state relationality pushes us to think more creatively about the sites that are available for citizenship performativity, especially for marginalized female minorities in contemporary Britain.[3]

Encountering Gender and Religion

Focusing my analysis on alliance-building, my work moves away from most existing scholarship on gender and religion, which typically analyses particular religions separately. Over the past 30 years, the field of gender and religion has transformed from an almost invisible category to a vibrant, nuanced and flourishing field of study (Abu-Lughod, 1998; El-Or, 1990; Fader, 2009; Fishman, 2009; Griffith, 1998; Mahmood, 2005). Inspired by pioneer scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod, 1986, 1998), Lynn Davidman (1991), Marie Griffith (1998), and Saba Mahmood (2005), the works that followed examined the growing models of female literacy, leadership, and clergy (Avishai, 2008a, 2008b, 2023; El-Or, 1990; Hammer, 2012, Raucher, 2020; Taragin-Zeller, 2021, 2020), the emergence of creative readings of traditional texts (Skinazi, 2018; Sonbol, 2015; Stadler, 2009, 2012; Taragin-Zeller 2014, 2015, 2023), as well as ritual practices (Koren, 2006; Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2015; Ochs, 2007; Rock-Singer 2020), and legal issues in marriage and divorce (Irshai, 2012; Joffe & Neil, 2012; Mir-Hosseini, 2013; Zion-Waldoks, 2015).

One of the overarching themes that emerge from this body of scholarship is that religious women are currently questioning the norms, ideologies, and practices that are accepted in their communities as they struggle to integrate sacred texts and ways of

life with "Western"-feminist ideals and practices (Ammerman, 2005; Avishai, 2008b). These studies have offered detailed accounts of women's lives while rooting these experiences in particular historical, cultural, and social settings. Yet, these studies have tended to focus on the ways particular groups of religious women negotiate their gendered religious identities vis-à-vis "Western"-feminist ideals, notions and practices.

In this paper, I suggest to shift the point of analytical interest to examine alliances between two minority groups as they negotiate (and trouble) state imaginaries about non-Christian female citizens. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among Jewish and Muslim interfaith activists, I offer an ethnographic account of the creative ways Jewish and Muslim women negotiate their identities, challenges, and struggles as women of faith, while forging alliances amid growing instances of antisemitism and Islamophobia. These findings resonate with Saba Mahmood's argument that modern secular governance entails "fundamental shifts in conceptions of self, time, space, ethics and morality, as well as a reorganization of social, political and religious life" (Mahmood, 2015). In keeping with contemporary anthropological writing on the state, I conceptualize the state as an "assemblage of agents, mechanisms, institutions, ideologies and discourses" (Kravel-Tovi, 2017, p. 38), that are far from stable, coherent, or monolithic. Building on this literature, I aim to tell a story about the ways Jewish and Muslim women build alliances to disrupt what they perceive as stereotypical imaginations of the state, in the broadest sense possible.

By focusing on female Jewish-Muslim alliances, I do not intend to further the dichotomy between the so-called "secular" and "religious." On the contrary, this project offers to diversify the binary categories of what being Jewish, or Muslim (in this case) entails. Inspired by Mary Douglas (Douglas, 1966), I maintain that the borders of communities are where real change (and danger) lurk. The margins are sometimes the most constructive places to search for new configurations of societal change. Taking this into account, an approach searching for constructions of gender norms in marginal, experimental, and unexpected places can help broaden normative perspectives (Imhoff, 2017). By focusing on interfaith encounters, I am also following ethnographic critiques of scholarship on religion that solely focus on sacred space, rituals, and practice. Whether having lunch, marching at a rally, or simply sharing a cup of tea, I argue that gendered identities are "produced not only in synagogues, churches or mosques" (Fader, 2009, p. 3), and seek to expand the places we look to study how religious gendered identities are negotiated (cf Eichler-Levine, 2020).

This work is also inspired by feminist scholars who have highlighted the gendered ways citizenship is performed. In Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis's groundbreaking "Women-Nation-State" (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989), they set the theoretical framework to explore the ways women affect and are affected by national and ethnic processes and how these relate to the state. Since this watershed publication, much attention has been paid to ways "citizenship projects" construct men and women differently (Fernando, 2014; Gorski et al., 2012). While earlier studies highlighted the ways the state treats men and women unequally, feminist scholars studied the ways state projects, themselves, constitute "state subjects" in gendered ways. Anthropological examinations of the French context have been particularly helpful in highlighting how

gendered processes of citizenship are also linked to racialized imaginations of religion (see Arkin, 2013; Asad, 2003; Bowen, 2016; Fernando, 2014; Iteanu, 2013). And still, these studies focus predominantly on contestations between one religious community and the state. My approach advances this conversation by looking at interfaith activism where women from two different minority groups share their experiences of marginalization while disrupting "strictly observant" gendered imaginations by putting forward alternative representations of non-Christian religious women in the British public sphere.

The choice to focus on the Jewish-Muslim context, with a particular emphasis on women, is two-fold. First, this work draws on a growing body of work which considers Jewish-Muslim connections and commonalities (Becker, 2022; Bharat, 2021; Egorova, 2018; Everett, 2019; Everett & Gidley 2018; Kashani-Sabet & Wenger, 2014; Lewis, 2013), instead of previous trends which portrayed Judaism and Islam "as at odds" (Kashani-Sabet & Wenger, 2014, p. 1). For example, in 2021, the U.K.'s Jewish Community Security trust (CST) recorded the highest total of antisemitic attacks ever recorded in a single calendar year, including a total of 2,255 incidents, an increase of 34% from the 1,684 incidents recorded by CST in 2020 (CST 2021).[4] Similarly, Tell Mama, the U.K.'s Muslim organization which measures anti-Muslim incidents, reported that almost one third of the Muslims in their study (27.5%) indicated that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate are almost a daily occurrence (Tell Mama, 2018). The rise of Islamophobia and antisemitism in the United Kingdom is playing out across both political and social domains. This is marked by heated political debates centered on allegations of antisemitism and Islamophobia within mainstream British politics (especially recent controversies surrounding antisemitism in the Labor Party). As Brexit and nationalism continue to dominate U.K. politics (Klaff, 2020; Kundnani, 2015), minority positionality is a concern for Jews and Muslims alike—but far more for women. Current reports have documented how religious minorities, and especially visibly-religious women are struggling, hinting to a gendered dimension of both antisemitism and Islamophobia. For example, in a recent examination of gendered experiences of antisemitism in 13 different European countries, women were more likely to experience gender discrimination.[5] In turn, a recent quantitative study noted that women are at greater risk of experiencing racism and Islamophobia (60%), resonating with other studies on the topic (Finlay and Hopkins, 2020; Tell Mama, 2018). This exposes how "The conceptualization of Islamophobia as a gender- neutral form of racism underestimates the centrality of gender as an ongoing, co-constitutive axis of power that structures Islamophobia." (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020, p. 649, also see: Zine, 2006).

Jewish and Muslim women in the U.K. also share many dispositions and challenges.[6] While the Jewish and Muslim women I met came from different classes, ethnicities, and national backgrounds, many Jewish and Muslim women dream to find more active roles in religious life, prayer, and rituals (even though the extent of these dreams was an area of contention). These women also wish to access religious knowledge and take part in the production and transmission of religious texts that have traditionally been restricted. As ideals about gender roles and work/family balance

challenge religious communities, religious women wish to excel professionally while maintaining traditional roles and communal expectations as spouses and mothers.

Taking these similarities seriously, this study examines the ways Jewish and Muslim women come together to share these difficulties and strive to achieve social, cultural and civic change. Even though Jewish and Muslim communities have tended to keep distance from one another while questioning each other's loyalties and affiliations, the recent rise in interfaith initiatives among Jewish and Muslim women reveals a realignment of forces among religious minorities as they search for creative ways to bring forward a better future. This study advances recent calls to "get away from the noise" (Everett & Gidley, 2018:174) and study moments of collaboration (Becker, 2022; Egorova, 2018; Everett, 2019; Kashani-Sabet & Wenger, 2014; Lewis, 2013). I ask: What technologies of the self are employed as Jewish and Muslim women reconstruct their identities together as non-Christian female citizens? How do these gendered identities intersect with other identities, such as class, ethnicity, religion and nationalism? And finally, are these creative portrayals of female citizenship capable of subverting local forms of power, racism and exclusion?

Researching Jews and Muslims in the United Kingdom

Muslims and Jews in the UK form a myriad of diverse groups. While both are considered minority groups by law, Islam is currently the second largest religious group in the United Kingdom after Christianity (33.2 million), with almost 3.5 million (mostly Sunni) adherents, and Jews estimated at 336,965. Roughly half of England's Muslim population live in London, and three out of every five Jews in the U.K. reside in greater London (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Even though the oldest Jewish community in Britain is Spanish-Portuguese, 80% to 90% percent of British Jews are well-established Ashkenazi Jews, with growing numbers of Haredi (known as ultra-Orthodox) Jews due to high birth rates. Although Muslims living in Britain today trace their origins to many parts of the world, most have roots in former British India, mainly Pakistan and Bangladesh (Bowen, 2016). There are also discrepancies between the two groups regarding education, employment, and socioeconomic backgrounds (See Office for National Statistics, 2020).

While female leadership is established in Progressive Jewish circles, official leadership in Orthodox Judaism as well as most Muslim denominations is male (Avishai, 2008a; Hammer, 2012; Simmonds, 2020; Taylor-Guthartz, 2021). Even though there have been recent advancements in female leadership (e.g., female ordination in Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Muslim women leading prayers, and progressive initiatives such as the inclusive mosque),[7] in the more "traditional" streams, women still mainly pursue leadership roles through other avenues such as charity, social action, and most relevant to the case at hand—interfaith.

This paper draws on ethnographic findings collected as part of a multisited ethnography (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) examining Jewish-Muslim female interfaith initiatives around the United Kingdom. Between 2017 and 2020, I participated in over 40 field observations at a variety of female grassroots interfaith activities in the United

Kingdom. These events took place in private homes, coffee shops or parks (when weather permitted), whereas larger events typically took place in Jewish culture venues (e.g., JW3/Jewish Museum) or local mosques and synagogues.[8] In some cases, meetings were also held in other communal spaces, including local churches or community centers. While large events are publicized through social media networks, individual invitations offer pathways into more intimate events. I took part in both small groups who meet regularly as well as one-off large-scale events.

In all of these encounters, I became acquainted with women from various parts of both Muslim and Jewish communities in the United Kingdom. I met women from high socioeconomic backgrounds, who worked long hours but also earned above average salaries. I also encountered stay-at-home mothers, as well as women struggling to balance demanding jobs and responsibilities at home—which left little time to devote to interfaith activities. Most of these women identified as heterosexual, and were above 30 (a challenge, many wanted to remedy by finding creative ways to lure teens into interfaith activism, a challenge also documented in the U.S. context).[9]

Interfaith participants came from various professional backgrounds as well as different socioeconomic statuses. In fact, group leaders explicitly stressed the concerted effort they put into balancing Jewish and Muslim attendance in each group while striving to create diversity with minimal socioeconomic power dynamics. As many groups are formed based on geographical vicinity, some groups brought together Jewish and Muslim women in middle-upper class neighborhoods, while others came from low-middle class backgrounds. The Jewish women came from secular, Progressive, Reform, Conservative, traditional and modern-Orthodox backgrounds, though ultra-Orthodox women rarely interacted in these settings.[10] Among Muslim women, participants were predominately from Sunni backgrounds. Some were born it the United Kingdom and others came from communities with varying links to Asian, Turkish, Arab, and Somali communities. Some self-defined as "cultural" Muslims, and others varied in their levels of Islamic observance and stringencies, though many participants mentioned that they seemed to be more observant than their Jewish counterparts. A sizable number of the Muslim activists had converted to Islam later on in life, all of whom were devout in their outlook. Whereas some Jewish and Muslim women would only eat in Halal or kosher restaurants, others were comfortable eating vegetarian meals in non-certified settings. In this sense, these encounters were not only encounters of interfaith but of intrafaith.

Fifteen semistructured interviews were conducted with interfaith activists, enabling women to share their personal experiences in their own words in an informal and flexible setting. In addition, five interviews were conducted with female Jewish and Muslim interfaith leaders and organizers of interfaith initiatives. After a few months of fieldwork, I was invited to volunteer in one of the main female interfaith initiatives. While volunteering as a source for ethnographic data is a unique mode of research (Kayikci, 2020), for the purpose of this paper I would note that turning into a volunteer allowed access to organizational aspects of interfaith work as well as offered a unique way to gain insights to strategies of intersectional activism (and their limits). I also joined numerous interfaith WhatsApp groups, which allowed me to follow both online and offline communication between activists. Recordings from interviews and other

encounters in the field were transcribed verbatim and analyzed on both a separate and comparative basis using a grounded theory approach. As the number of women taking part in such grassroots activities is relatively small, not only have I kept the names of my interviewees anonymous, I do not provide any further information (unless necessary) as such details may compromise their anonymity.[11]

One final note is necessary. As a self-identifying Jew, my interest in the field of interfaith went without question for my interlocutors and they were keen to bring me into the fold. We would often joke that as a newcomer to the United Kingdom, joining grassroots initiatives all over the United Kingdom was a wonderful way to get to see the country. The women I met were my local guides to cafes and shopping as well as British politics and minority resistance. It was with them that I felt more at home in a country that seems more and more unwelcoming to women who are visibly religious, like me. Walking the streets of London, Manchester or Birmingham, I came to understand the importance of alliance-building for female minorities, an understanding which lies at the heart of this paper. In what follows, I show how and why minority alliances are crafted while conceptualizing these within a particular history of racism and interfaith activism in the United Kingdom. Drawing on ethnographic finding to illustrate how gendered politics of representation are refashioned in interfaith settings, I make a case for the importance of studying alliance-building at state margins.

Finding an\Other Sister

On June 2019, Asma posted a message on her local Jewish-Muslim group WhatsApp. The message included a screenshot of a tweet made by a British MP showcasing a meeting he had earlier that morning with faith leaders. In the picture, a group of 15 men were sitting in a beautifully decorated conference room as they discuss how to better integrate refugees in the United Kingdom. Asma shared this picture with the WhatsApp group and asked—"Shall we retweet with a polite reminder that we need more women to be around these tables?"

Linda quickly responded "Ouch!," which was followed by a wave of negative comments culminating with a big approval of Asma's initial suggestion. As Shahada put it—"We should definitely do something together!"

For the next few hours, the WhatsApp group members shared stories about the exclusion of women in their communities, stories they also shared in many of the face-to-face events I attended. I learned how many women were frustrated that they cannot take part in the "official" leadership roles of their communities, and, to put it simply—felt they rarely had a seat around the table. Further, lacking agency within their home community meant that they were also underrepresented on the state level. This reflects how marginalization is multilayered and linked to numerous systems of domination (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Zine, 2006).

During my fieldwork, I was struck by the notion that even though these women experience multiple and simultaneous levels of exclusion—including social class, race, gender, and socioeconomic status—religion serves as a productive lens through

which they construct their similarities and enacted their citizenship. Elizabeth captured this feeling articulately during one of our conversations:

> You know it's the alcoholic anonymous kind of model. . .. feeling lonely is not only a psychological and emotional experience. It can also be a religious experience. There is something comforting in knowing that we have the same frustrations and angers . . . it really is ridiculous already! But, on the other hand—I feel like saying: "No!! Can't someone get it right?? We call each other both to moan and to figure out how to deal with these things. By sharing experiences, you know—how did you deal with it? What did you do about it? How did you manage it . . . there are some practical outcomes . . . It obviously has emotional outcomes but it is a sharing of ideas. There is work that is done through this sharing.

Elizabeth's narrative reflects the paradox of finding one's own frustrations in others. On the one hand, acknowledging similarities is a positive way to overcome loneliness. However, she points to some negative outcomes as the practice of acknowledging similarities also entails a danger of igniting even more frustration. These types of frustrations mirror the complexities of women in conservative religions who decide to stay, even as gender equality awareness grows (Gaddini, 2019, 2022). It is through their religious commonality that Jewish and Muslim women (learn to) perform their feminism.

The comradery Jewish and Muslim women find in each other's experiences is especially meaningful as both struggle to find welcoming spaces to voice their frustrations among secular feminists. Hareem shared an example with me, as we drank iced tea on a surprisingly warm day in a central London coffee shop. Hareem brought a copy of her recently purchased book "Faithfully Feminist" to our meeting and articulated how rare it is for her to find a feminist book that resonates well with her. She also shared how hard it was for her, and her visibly Muslim friends to find their place in feminist groups:

> You know, I have a very capable friend, Shumaila, who studied gender during her undergrad studies. Shumaila told me this terrible story that happened when she went to a feminist panel in London. Three women gave really interesting talks but none had said anything about religion. Shumaila went to the organizer at the end of the panel and told her that it would be really interesting to hear about those experiences as well. At first, the organizer sounded open to the idea. "Perhaps you know someone who would be interested?," the organizer asked. Shumaila used all of her courage and said—"I would." The organizer laughed at her, looked at her head covering and said—"I don't think people would be very interested in hearing your perspective." "Could you imagine? That is what she said! And to her face! How humiliating!

Hareem's story about her friend Shumaila is a telling one. It reflects the quest for existence and acceptance of a head-covering feminist Muslim woman in a world of secular-based feminism in the British public sphere. As Kristin Aune has shown, not only do British feminists tend to be secular, feminists put forward secular assumptions,

discourses and practices with a well-defined hierarchy between "secular" and "religious" feminists (Aune, 2015), who are framed as "good" and "bad" feminists (Ahmed, 2017), respectively. But, this is also a consequence of what Talal Asad has called an "imagined transgression," in which visibly religious women are judged for their "choice" to wear a headscarf (Asad, 2003). In other words, these binaries are grounded in the secular state in which binaries of "good" and "bad" Muslim citizens determine who may or may not be allowed to be "visibly" religious (also see Fernando, 2014). As a consequence, women like Shumaila, who wish to participate in feminist dialogues and "secularized" civic projects are not allowed access due to their visibly religious practices and the submissive imaginaries these encompass. In what follows, I argue that female interfaith initiatives enable a space to work through these binaries. These initiatives offer a springboard to "craft relationships" which can disrupt "strictly observant" representations of Jewish and Muslim women.

Gendering Interfaith in the United Kingdom

The women I met were crafting relationships in a particular British infrastructure, that Jasmine described as "a hub of interfaith." Indeed, interfaith in the United Kingdom has a rather long history, dating back to the early 20th century. Starting as a predominantly Christian-Jewish initiative that institutionalized through the council of Christians and Jews in 1942, faith leaders (particularly Christian) pursued dialogue to improve relations within increasingly diverse populations. In 1988, the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* reflected a renewed public interest in interfaith dialogue. The controversial introduction of Islam to British audiences and the heated reaction of some Muslims to its publication reflected a threat to British multiculturalism, thus marking the entry of public debates about Islam in Britain in the late 1980s and the attempt to bridge differences through interfaith dialogue (Modood, 2005; Prideaux & Dawson, 2018). Thus, even though Britain has become increasingly secular, religion is increasingly present in public discourse and debate (Davie 1994, 2015).

From 1990s onwards, government funding of interfaith initiatives has contributed to the growth of interfaith initiatives in both grasp and popularity. This trend is mirrored in the number of relevant organizations which grew from 30 to over 230 between the late 1980s and the mid-2010 (Fahy & Bock, 2018). Together with this rise, a myriad of interfaith positions and employment opportunities have emerged, from interfaith chaplains in universities and hospitals to social think tanks and NGO work, called cynically by some, "the interfaith industry" (Brink-Danan, 2015). While a detailed description of this history is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief sketch of the contemporary interfaith landscape is crucial to understand the context in which grassroots interfaith Jewish-Muslim female initiatives have emerged as spaces to enact non-Christian citizenship.

The current interfaith landscape is varied, creative and dynamic. To give but one example, the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFK) organized the first interfaith week, geared toward the wider British public in 2009. By 2017, interfaith week included 700 events and activities across the country, 170 taking place in London. Examples of

these activities include: interfaith gardening, cooking, tea parties, open mosques as well as asylum seeker drop-ins, arranged by local communities. Jan-Jonathan Boch and Jonh Fahy have demonstrated how these activities reflect both "the breadth of contemporary interfaith engagement in the capital; and its intersection with everyday concerns" (Fahy & Bock, 2018, p. 52).

Similarly to other countries, interfaith movements have gained prominence in the U.K. post 9/11 as a means for social cohesion and potential remedies for religious intolerance and radicalization, funded heavily by the Labor government (Mubarak, 2006; Prideaux & Dawson, 2018). Further, while historically interfaith activities have tended to focus on theology, social action initiatives have started to dominate the interfaith scene. Today, transnational networks, state-funded programs, and small-scale neighborhood initiatives act to address a range of social and political issues, including, but not limited to, religious extremism, poverty alleviation, climate change, migrant crises, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. The shift toward social action has had immediate ramifications for women as it has allowed a renewed entry point for female leadership vis a vis the earlier theological agenda, that was predominately male led.

Laura Marks,[12] widely known in the Jewish community for her "Mitzvah Day" project and Julie Siddiqi, founder of Islam inspired "Sadaqa Day," are perhaps the most obvious examples for such projects. Even though their projects offer wide public practices for social justice around the United Kingdom, in 2016 they decided to partner up and begin the U.K.'s largest female interfaith network—Nisa Nashim. While other female-led initiatives existed before and continue to exist after the launch of this network in the United Kingdom and beyond,[13] its existence reflects a shift and overall desire for more focused settings to foster meaningful discussions and relationships and female leadership. Further, as visibly religious women have become primary targets of painful racist attacks (Hargreaves, 2016; Saeed, 2016), the recent rise in interfaith initiatives among religious women reveals a realignment of forces among female religious minorities based on their "religiously based marginality" which positions them as outsiders in the Christian-dominated British context (see Hersch, 2019, p. 44). At these interfaith gatherings women seek to focus on their similar exclusion, bridging gaps through friendship, while eating, praying, learning sacred texts, or engaging in social action together while promoting female activists who disrupt public imaginaries of passive and submissive religious women. While the distinction between religion/politics and private/public is constantly celebrated in the British context (Engelke, 2012), interfaith activism, as I will show in the next section, troubles these binary categories.

Interfaith Activism and the Gendered Politics of Representation

Many of the women I met framed their involvement with interfaith activities as something that happened unintentionally. Resonating with Zion-Waldok's descriptions of unintentional activism among religious women (Zion-Waldoks, 2015), they downplayed their motivations and engaged in a dismissive and unintentional discourse of their initial involvement in interfaith activism. They shared how through a

conversation at a local park, a mutual friend or a formal invitation to speak about their own work, they found themselves in an encounter where they were representing Judaism or Islam to others.[14] As Hind put it:

> My friend invited me to an evening about Jewish and Muslim wedding practices and customs. At first it was a bit awkward, but then we started talking and laughing and you know . . . someone asked me about Hijab. And even though this was something I knew a lot about I was really worried. I had never really talked about my choices to non-Muslims. How was I supposed to represent it to others?

For many of these women it was the first time that they had turned into representatives of their home communities. These introductions to interfaith encounters were often marked by class differences as they extended existing socioeconomic networks. For example, teachers might reach out to teachers in their workplace and high income professionals may invite peers to an interfaith event. In all these encounters, this transformative process was imbued with uncertainty as they were not given an "official" job as representatives of their communities. Differing from the dynamics of their male counterparts, women found ways to positions of influence through women's social networks, unofficial establishments and organizations, such as charities. These different dynamics of representation challenge how and what makes social representation—theoretically and politically. Further, this quick and almost unintentional transition offered a space to become more "active," as many of them put it, but also complicated their notions and practices of religion. Alice shared such an account of this dynamic:

> I was working late on a Friday afternoon and met Nadia after work. We got drinks and suddenly I realized it was already Shabbat. I felt so guilty. Here I am working at an interfaith organization and having a beer on Shabbat with my Muslim friend. I felt so bad.

Alice's story reflects an intriguing phenomenon. Both Alice and Nadia are non-observant women who are active in interfaith activities. In their personal lives, they are happy to live as secular or culturally engaged. Namely, even though alcohol is prohibited in Islam, Nadia is accustomed to drinking beer after work (like many other Brits) and Alice does not strictly observe Sabbath guidelines. Yet, "transgressing" with their Muslim or Jewish interfaith friends, makes them rethink these practices, raising the question of how much of one's Jewishness/Muslimness is constructed for the purpose of interfaith representation. Having a beer with a Muslim friend on a Friday night was a paradox. It was simultaneously an enactment of interfaith ideals and a renegotiation of what it means to be a cultural-ethnically Jew/Muslim. It is their transgression of hegemonic boundaries that allows them to renegotiate their religious identities as not narrowly defined by Islamic or Jewish law. Thus, crafting relationships with women who are from an "other" group is a multifaceted encounter that takes on different meanings in diverse situations. It is also through their participation in interfaith that they enact other types of models of culturally-religious women, while disrupting and negotiating multiple types of so-called "good" or "bad" Jews or Muslims.

The negotiation of multiple types of "good" or 'bad' Muslims or Jews and the question of representation was not only a personal quest. It was a political debate in interfaith activism, particularly behind the scenes. During my fieldwork, I accompanied one of the steering committee meetings where a group of women were organizing an upcoming panel about head covering in Judaism and Islam. As we discussed potential participants it quickly became clear that this would be a complicated issue. "We can't have a panel of women who all cover their head! In my family, no one covers their head and it has always been that way. We must show that too!" One of the women cried out. "But it is not interesting to hear a story about someone who doesn't have a dilemma, we need to pick women who have had a journey with this, who have debated it," was the heated response. After a long meeting, they finally came to a conclusion. There would be a Jewish head-covering woman, a Muslim convert head-covering woman together with a Muslim-born woman who chose not to cover her head, and finally, the panel would be chaired by a secular Jewish woman, who never really debated whether or not to cover.

This debate was so complicated (and heated, in a particularly reserved British way) because the question of representation, particularly through highly politicized practices served as a threat. The formation of a panel about head covering brings representation anxieties to the fore as it involves symbolic negotiations of group boundaries and highly-politicized piety hierarchies that cross clear divisions between private and public. As public representations of religious (especially Muslim) women, constantly perpetuate stereotypical head covering without accounting for large ethnic differences, panels are meant to disrupt these images by showcasing more variety. As they aimed to represent multiplicity and diversity within each context, they didn't want to have one portrait of a Jewish and Muslim woman. Yet, they did want to create a common dilemma that links both Jewish and Muslim women together (see Becker, 2022). Through careful work they crafted a public representation of non-Christian head coverings in which both head covering and non-covering are presented as dilemmas. Hence, it is not only women who cover their hair that present a dilemma and a political statement (see Asad, 2003). The Jewish and Muslim activists I met wanted to make it really clear that there is a multiplicity of desires and politics that are rarely surfaced in the British public sphere. And it is this project that they wish to disrupt, together.

Performing non-Christian Britishness

While troubling the gendered imaginaries of Jewish and Muslim women is central to interfaith activism, interfaith was also a place (to learn) to perform non-Christian citizenship in the British public sphere. But, first, we must ask: what spaces are available for women of minority groups to perform their citizenship? To answer this question, let us begin with a reflection offered by Lina:

> I am tired of big interfaith conferences. They don't really lead anywhere. I think that the only way we can make real change is through friendship. Eating together, in one's home, inviting a stranger into your home to have a cup of tea and meet your family . . . It is not

> just a cup of tea, as some people might tell you. Crossing this threshold is how we learn to really be together. It is rather British of us, isn't it? And it is only after we are together that we can face all the challenges and hate out there.

Lina, here, refers to the common ridicule of interfaith. One the one hand, she is aware of critical takes on interfaith, a critique that she partially agrees with. On the other hand, she believes that there is also much potential. According to her account, "real" change is only possible where both physical and metaphorical thresholds are crossed. Hence, having tea in a big conference hall may be "just a cup of tea," but inviting a stranger into your own home for a cup tea, is "not just a cup of tea." It is where real change happens. Lina's claim also troubles private\public dichotomies regarding resistance. While having a cup of tea at home seems to be abiding to "secular" state assumptions regarding the location of religion in the private sphere, they use the home to reclaim British public space. It is also, as she comments playfully, a rather British thing to do. And, I would argue, a private space where British citizenship is made. Thus, having tea, for example, can offer alternative spaces to remake the political. To paraphrase Jodi Eichler-Levine, interfaith activism remakes space (Eichler-Levine, 2020, p. 152).

Interfaith activism was also a place (to learn) to perform non-Christian citizenship in the British workplace. For example, as both *Kosher* and *Halal* dietary observance have the potential to create social exclusion and awkwardness, Jewish-Muslim encounters provide a useful setting to learn how to explain these practices to unfamiliar colleagues. As Tammy explained:

> The kosher thing is a big issue. When we have a meeting at a mosque, Hafza bought stuff in the kosher store, or I can bring, but it is very complicated. Often what we do is say: "You bring the juice and the fruit and we will bring the cookies." Things like that are really interesting though- because that is offensive, sometimes . . . at some point you have to start talking about those things honestly. Instead of saying bring fruit and ignore it. It gradually gets better with stages. And, the truth is you get better at doing it. You learn how. And then you can teach others.

Tammy's narrative reflects a gradual learning process of how to navigate kosher dietary needs in mixed settings. The first stage entails creative solutions that essentially avoid the discussion altogether.[15] But, as Tammy explains, this cannot go on for long. At some point, the Muslims will want to bring homemade food or invite their new friends over to their home for a meal. A rejection of this type of hospitality can pose serious challenges to a relationship as they collide with gendered and cultural expectations. As friendship and mutual understanding grow, Tammy finds a language to explain Jewish dietary laws and restrictions. Not only will this type of discourse enable Tammy to solidify her relationships, she (and others I have spoken to) admit that these tools benefit them in other encounters beyond this group. Salma, a hard-working barrister, shared such an account with me:

> During my first year at the firm, I would politely get out of pub-drinking when there was a special occasion to celebrate. But, I knew this couldn't go on for long. After half a year it was New Year's and I couldn't go. I knew I was not only missing out socially. I knew these informal setting were crucial for getting good cases. I decided that I could be honest, just like we were in our interfaith group. So while everyone was handing out greeting cards with wine bottles, I wrote a New Year's card and added some dates instead of the wine, explaining the importance of dates in Muslim culture, and that it is not customary to send wine. I sent it to all my colleagues. This turned out to be a huge success. I couldn't believe it but it actually offered a unique opportunity to speak with colleagues who I had barely spoken to at that point.

Similar to Tammy, Salma's story reflects the gradual steps one learns to take to have a conversation about dietary restrictions in a mixed workplace (and, in this case, a male-dominated setting). Mirroring Tammy's initial evasion of dietary difference, her first strategy is avoidance but she creatively finds a way to make her difference work to her advantage, offering new opportunities for dialogue, conversation and relationships as well as work benefits in a non-Muslim male dominated network. Salma's creativity is directly linked to her experience in interfaith groups, which provides a safe and experimental space to (learn to) perform non-Christian religiosity in the British workplace. This also allows Salma to find a different way to show civil reciprocity on New Year's eve.

Gender, Interfaith Activism, and the Performance of British Civic Life

I have argued here that in a highly politicized Britain, Jewish, and Muslim women come together to disrupt 'strictly observant' gendered representations of Judaism and Islam. As they trouble misleading public portrayals, I found that Jewish-Muslim encounters are also sites for the construction and performances of British civil citizenship. In what follows, I argue that both these processes—disrupting "strictly observant" gendered representations and performing British citizenship—are deeply linked. I also maintain that conceptualizing this connection is useful to think more carefully about the intersection of gender, religion and citizenship.

As mentioned earlier, the performance of citizenship is often gendered. Many times, these gendered processes are also linked to racialized imaginations of religion (see Arkin, 2013; Asad, 2003; Bowen, 2016; Fernando, 2014; Iteanu, 2013). In a growing antisemetic and Islamophobic Britain, the women I met were struggling to find ways to show the "imagined" state that they are "good" Muslims and Jews. ("Good," meaning, that they could "pass" without upsetting white Protestant civic life). As women from minority groups are subject to xenophobic and racialized forms of hatred, not only do they find support in Jewish-Muslim interfaith settings, these spaces also enable them to rehearse non-Christian ways to perform "good" citizenship.

To be clear, I am not referring to formal acts of "doing" citizenship, such as voting. On the contrary, I argue that civic efforts are aimed at correcting public images that

regard Jewish and Muslim women as "unsuitable" citizens. As mentioned earlier, in line with leading anthropological studies of the state, I conceptualize the state as encompassing various agents, mechanisms, institutions, ideologies and discourses. Thus, for the women I met, performing good citizenship meant unraveling submissive notions of strictly observant religion in multiple spheres. They constantly wanted to prove that they were autonomous women that could fit into the British public sphere, even if they decide to wear (or not to wear) a head covering or whether they preferred not to participate in New Year's Eve festivities.

Having said that, it is important to note that performing non-Christian religiosity in the British public sphere is different for Jews and Muslims. The more recent migration of Muslims to the United Kingdom affects settlement patterns reflected in socioeconomic differences. Also, while Jews are not only white and Muslims are not always brown, the racialized history of Muslim immigration to the UK (and elsewhere), provide different challenges in the public sphere. Similar to the ways in which Su'ad Abdul Kahbeer describes how Islam in the United States is often coded as "Black," religion itself can become raced (Abdul Kahbeer, 2016). As Jews and Muslim are "othered" together, they find creative ways to counter this "othering" together. In fact, what struck me most about these findings is that even though the women I met came from different classes, ethnicities and national backgrounds, their non-Christian religious commonality serves as a central identity to construct their similarities and perform their citizenship. In other words, as they realize that they are "othered" together they realize they can (and perhaps must?) "counter-act" together.

Sabrina Alimahomed-Wilson reminds us that "gender influences and structures men's experiences of Islamophobia as well" (2020, p. 671). For example, the exclusive targeting of Muslim men and boys after 9/11 is a clear example of gendered Islamophobia which links Muslim men with violence. Even though Jewish men are often targets of antisemitism, the stakes are different, and we need more work to study these convergences. Elisabeth Becker has recently shown how German Muslims invoke parallels with German Jews to "contend with their uncivil status" in Germany society (2022, p. 3). My work resonates with Becker's findings, pushing us to further explore how minority alliances are built while refashioning history, politics and civil futurity.

While previous studies have predominantly focused on contestations between one religious community and the state (Fernando, 2014; Özyürek, 2015), looking at interfaith movements where women from two different minority groups come together, exposes their exclusion as non-Christian women in a predominately Christian Britain. It also tells us about the deep entanglements between different groups of religious minorities as they (attempt to push) back. Thus, while much scholarship has shown how interfaith settings are crucial for the construction of religious identities, I found that interfaith activism also serves as a site for the performance of civic life. By highlighting alliance-building, I argue that modern secular governance also reorganizes the ways the political is remade and resisted. Not only does this help us rethink the attraction to (and politics) of interfaith activism, it challenges our understandings of citizenship and the state. Because citizenship is often gendered, and because gender and religion intersect on such a basic level, it is crucial to understand them together.

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Notes

1. In this paper, I use Deborah Lipstadt's usage of antisemitism instead of anti-Semitism. See Lipstadt and Deborah (2019) and also Renton and Gidley (2017).
2. Scholars of secularism have highlighted how secularism is not a mere "separation of state from religion." Rather, secularism shapes modern governance, even in states that may be perceived as "non-secular." Following this scholarship, in this paper I use the term Christian-dominated Britain to capture the ways 'Western' states synthesize Protestant Christian traditions and modern, fluctuating interests of the state. (Agrama, 2010; Arkin, 2013; Asad, 2003; Salaymeh & Lavi, 2021).
3. This analysis is focused on the cultivation of British citizenship, and therefore paper does not focus on the common "elephant in the room," as many activists put it—Israel-Palestine. For more, see Stronger Together? The Limits of Intersectional Alliances among Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the UK. Society of Anthropology of Religion, American Anthropological Association, 14.5.21. This paper was also written before October 7 2023 which has impacted the lives of thousands in Israel/Palestine and beyond, as well as provided an enormous challenge to Jewish-Muslim relations worldwide. I hope to discuss these events in future work.
4. This unprecedented annual figure in "the landscape of UK-based antisemitism in 2021 is largely defined by responses to conflict in Israel and Palestine." This is an increase of 34% from the 1,684 incidents recorded by CST in 2020 and is 24% higher than the previous record incident total of 1,813, reported in 2019 (CST, 2021, p. 4).
5. Jensen found that gender was important to understand antisemitism. She also shows that gender affects men and women in different ways as women will experience more gender-based harassment and men will experience a larger variety of hate acts (see Jensen, 2022).
6. For an analysis of the French context, see (Arkin, 2013).
7. For example, see (Liberatore, 2019; Nyhagen, 2019; Raucher, 2019).
8. Whereas in Jewish communities both cultural and religious venues are possible locations for interfaith meetings, meetings that are hosted by Muslims are typically held in mosques. This is possibly linked to organizational infrastructures in the Muslim context which funnel charity funds to mosques and education more often than cultural buildings. Also see: Moses et al., (2022).

9. See Hersch (2019), especially 30–45.
10. Scholars have constantly reported that British Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) aim to keep separate and not mix. See Kasstan (2019). During my fieldwork, I can count a handful of Haredi women who attended these settings.
11. Ethical approval granted by The Woolf Institute, Cambridge, UK.
12. Laura Marks and Julie Siddiqi are the real names of two public figures, who established Nisa-Nashim, a Jewish-Muslim Women's network in the United Kingdom. While these two women have gained much visibility through their interfaith activism and thus highlighted in this section, this article draws on an ethnographic study of a variety of organizations and grassroots efforts.
13. The U.S.-based Sisterhood of Salam Shalom was founded by Sheryl Olitzky and Atiya Aftab in 2010. See: Hersch (2019).
14. For an in-depth analysis of the different motivations to engage in Jewish-Muslim interfaith dialogue in the United States, see Hersch (2019), especially 30–45.
15. According to Orthodox Jewish law, fresh fruit is always kosher, whereas cooking or baking would entail a more complicated process of separation between milk and dairy. Having Jews bring cake and suggesting the Muslims bring fruit provides a creative way to avoid a discussion.

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