To what extent do the actions of the 
*Lioness of Allah* desecrate sacred space?

An analysis of “Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jummah” video and comments

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Abstract

The imprisonment of three members of the Russian feminist punk-rock group, Pussy Riot, for staging a “punk prayer” performance on the soles of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, has placed the spotlight on religious ‘sacred space’, its reputed inviolability and what may constitute its desecration. Qualitative research on Muslim sacred space in Western academic literature has been limited, with little engagement with Chidester and Linenthal’s reflection that “sacred space is inevitably contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols”\(^1\). This study seeks to remedy this knowledge gap by determining how Muslim ‘sacred space’ is constituted, with a particular emphasis upon its relationship with politics and gender. It will take as its case study, an instance of religio-political activism by a female Muslim activist during a Friday Jummah prayer in Britain and consider its reception within the context of sacred space, using comments made on the activist’s YouTube page from which a video recording of the incident was disseminated.

Introduction

The video “Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jumma”, produced by the YouTube channel LionessAndMehdjahid has provoked both ringing endorsements and severe criticism from YouTube commenters, primarily drawn from the British Muslim community. It has amassed a total of 15,776 views, significantly dwarfing the viewing count of other video’s hosted on the channel, in addition to 599 comments, as of 1\(^{st}\) December 2012. The video shows the self-styled “Lioness of Allah” interrupt a Khutba (sermon) during Jummah prayer at a mosque in Britain: she questions the imam about the alleged dearth of commentary and wider political mobilisation of his congregation during what is presumed to be the 2008-2009 Cast Led Operation in which over a thousand Palestinians were killed by Israeli army forces in Gaza.

This research project was conceived as part of an assessment for a postgraduate master’s course, which required data collection and analysis using a qualitative research method on a pertinent issue relating to Islam in contemporary Britain. The choice of researching the topic of sacred space within Islam came about primarily through my chance introduction to the Lioness’ video “Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jumma”, which immediately struck me for its bold and unorthodox challenge of religious authority, as well as the depth of emotional response it provoked in the commenters who watched it.

Qualitative research on Muslim sacred space in Western academic literature has been limited, with little engagement with Chidester and Linenthal’s reflection that “sacred space is inevitably contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols”\(^2\). This study seeks to remedy this knowledge gap by determining how

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2 Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p.15
Muslim ‘sacred space’ is constituted, with a particular emphasis upon its relationship with politics and gender. It will take as its case study, an instance of religio-political activism by a female Muslim activist during a Friday Jummah prayer in Britain and consider its reception within the context of sacred ‘time and space’, using comments made on the activist’s YouTube page.

Part I - Literature Review

Spatial Analysis and Sacred Space

Academic discussion pertaining to the role of space and its relationship with religion within the discipline of religious studies has been limited. Where scholars have indulged in this discussion, they have been principally engaged by either a ‘geography of religion’ perspective, with roots in the seventeenth century and a bias toward formally sanctioned religious spaces. Or they have focused their analyses on the more broadly conceived topic of ‘sacred space’, developed in the anthropological tradition, and which “arose following the conceptualisation of the ‘sacred’ in the early twentieth century”\(^3\). This study finds reason to refer to both of these scholarly enterprises in view of the ambiguous relationship the mosque under discussion has with sacred space, being recognised as a mosque among Muslims congregants, whilst also being the site of contestation over its sacred symbolism.

Any attempt to qualify a violation of ‘sacred space’, as in this study, necessarily demands the concept of the ‘sacred’ to be suitably defined. This is a challenging task as Adrian Ivakhiv notes that “religion and the sacred are historically variable constructs”\(^4\). Both the terms ‘religion’ and ‘sacred’ were historically formulated to differentiate between opposing categories, and often to legitimise certain areas of activity or knowledge over its respective antithesis, such as ‘religion’ from magic and superstition, and from science and secularism; whilst the ‘sacred’ has been used to distinguish itself from the profane and the secular\(^5\). Ivakhiv argues that “The terms emerge in and through efforts to articulate differences perceived to exist in the world, and in the process become tools to fix and entrench those very differences”\(^6\). In a similar vein and pertaining explicitly to the term ‘religious’ - although equally applicable to the ‘sacred’ - Jonathan Smith notes:

“‘religious’ is not a native term, it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as language plays in linguistics or cultures plays in anthropology.”\(^7\)

The literature and by extension this study is therefore considerably aware of the need for caution in appropriating terminology without due reflection on its current applicability to the

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\(^5\) Ivakhiv (2006) p.169
\(^6\) Ibid. p.170
object of study – terminology often predisposed to favouring secular conceptions of knowledge, even when discussing topics intimately connected with the ‘religious’. The application of terms such as ‘religion’ and ‘sacred’ to the Islamic tradition can be particularly troublesome. This is because the terms, as we understand them, emanate from a particular set of historical circumstances embedded within Western post enlightenment Christian conceptions of the relationship between the sacred and secular words. John Espositio notes:

“It is the sacred that gives birth to the secular by hiding behind a veil as it were. Where the sacred is not self-conscious, or narcissistic, enough to conceal itself in a sanctuary, to confine itself within an inviolate haven, the secular also remains unnoticeable. Such was the case in traditional Islamic societies where the sacred had no special retreats and the secular had no boundless freedom outside them... The confinement of religious activities and symbols to one institutional sphere ipso facto defines the rest of society as ‘profane’ outside the justification of the sacred.”

Definitions

Scholars of ‘sacred space’ have offered various definitions to determine what precisely should be thought of as constituting ‘the sacred’. Danièle Hervieu-Leger argues that the ‘sacred’ is “the experience of encountering a force and a presence that is stronger than self” which may occur in both religious and secular spheres of life. This definition of the sacred, as an entirely experiential encounter has been termed ‘substantial’ by Chidester and Linenthal. It has been criticised for “harbouring the very assumptions it is meant to study” by “seeking to replicate an insider’s evocation of certain experiential qualities that can be associated with the sacred.”

Alternatively, there is the ‘situational’ conceptualisation of the ‘sacred’, which Ivakhiv terms the ‘cognitive approach’ and which perceives the ‘sacred’ as “referring to the classification of persons, places, and things, involving the regulation of behaviour toward those objects through rules, protections, and prohibitions”. In this view ‘nothing is inherently sacred’ and using this approach, sacred spaces are seen as the outcome of ‘sacred making activities’ or ‘behaviours’ in accordance with the idea that “people construct such sites or environments through their imaginations, memories, actions and speech”. Ritual is arguably central to this

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8 Knott (2005)
9 Ivakhiv (2006) p.170
16 Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p.6
17 Knott (2005) p.98
process but this should not be misunderstood to indicate that ‘ritual is an expression of the sacred’\textsuperscript{18}. Jonathan Smith notes:

“Ritual is not an expression of or response to “the sacred”; rather something or someone is made sacred by ritual…divine and human, sacred and profane, are transitive categories, they serve as maps and labels, not substances; they are distinctions of office, indices of difference\textsuperscript{19}.”

In accordance with Durkheim sociological analysis of sacred space, Smith concurs that “things and people become sacred because they are identified with and used in places where ritual is enacted”\textsuperscript{20}. Furthermore, and in particular relevance to the study of sacred space during the Jummah prayer, Smith argues that “Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are”. It thereby produces a “controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be overwhelmingly present”\textsuperscript{21}. This analysis provokes the idea that the environment which embodies the sacred must struggle under human labour to maintain its sense of sacred from more quotidian activities that may easily engulf the space.

A third approach related to the ‘sacred’ has been described as ‘relational’. It promotes the notion that sacred places “cannot equally accommodate all possible interpretations, as they provide specific ‘affordances’…that render certain interpretations more probable than others”\textsuperscript{22}. In this view there is dialogical relationship between the landscape, biophysical and cultural topographies of the past, and more recent creative practices which determine spatial meanings.

Contestation and the Sacred

The fact that contestation has been identified as an inherent issue in contriving ‘sacred space’ is particularly relevant to the study at hand, which deals with an incident in which the ostensibly sacred character of a religious event in space is challenged. Ivakhiv argues,

“Conflict and competition…are inherent to spatiality – as, one might add, are collaboration, accommodation, and the negotiation of co-existence”\textsuperscript{23}.

Contestation and conflict, however, becomes especially significant in view of the fact that “a space or place is often experienced as most sacred by those who perceive it as risk of being desecrated by the very forces - economic, social or political – that made its consecration possible in the first place”\textsuperscript{24}.

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\textsuperscript{18} Knott (2005) p.101
\textsuperscript{20} Knott (2005) p.101
\textsuperscript{22} Ivakhiv (2006) p. 172
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p.15
Chidester and Linenthal propose that sacred space is contested for two reasons. Firstly this is because space is by its nature limited thereby inviting “competition and conflict over its organisation and control”\textsuperscript{25}. Secondly, conflict arises because of the fact that these finite spaces are endowed with ‘a surplus of signification’ which is ‘abundantly available for appropriation’:

“Due to the inherent surplus of signification in ‘the sacred’, no appropriation can ever be final, no exclusion can be total, and therefore, conflict over ownership and control of the symbolic surplus remains endemic in sacred spaces.”\textsuperscript{26}

Contestations over space in which the “entrepreneurial, the social, the political and other “profane” forces”\textsuperscript{27} are all at play must therefore be seen as the norm. Furthermore Ivakhiv argues that those spaces in which “the religious domain is clearly articulated as distinct from the secular world” are “products of a very particular activity, a purification involving practices of sacralisation and desacrilization, with various supporting mechanisms and ongoing mechanisms to keep this separation in place.”\textsuperscript{28}

**Desecration**

Chidester and Linenthal argue that desecration can take two forms: defilement and dispossession. Defilement occurs when the sacred order of ritualization which would otherwise maintain the ‘purity of the sacred space’ is disrupted, because, as mentioned previously, sacredness is the ‘by product’ of ritual behaviour. Acts of defilement can themselves be challenged and overcome “through rites of purification or rites of exclusion, such as excommunication, banishment, or execution”, thereby restoring the sanctity of the space. Notably, acts of defilement can also be countered by a process of denial, in which the actor’s presence is simply ignored, thereby, ostensibly depriving him/her of the agency to disrupt the process of ritualization\textsuperscript{29}. The second form of desecration, dispossession, is far more difficult to resolve, as the sacred space upon which a history of ritualization has occurred, is no longer accessible. In a global Islamic context, this notion of dispossession is particularly relevant to the status of Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem, which some Muslims regard as the third holiest space in Islam\textsuperscript{30}.

What is perceived as ‘desecration’ may also be a form of ritual engagement which seeks to “symbolise alternative relationships with sacred space”\textsuperscript{31}. Customarily these alternative processes of ritualization, which are particularly suited to creating sacred spaces whilst resisting domination, are described as inversion and hybridization strategies. Inversion is deemed as particularly suited to millenarian movements and seek to “reverse a prevailing

spatial orientation” through actively redistributing conventional special arrangement – such as making the peripheral, central. These strategies however focus specifically on reconstituting the spatial in a physically alternative setting, rather than adapting the signification of a given sacred space, through reorienting the rituals themselves as will be analysed in this study.

Sacred space and Islam

Veikko Anttonen argues that “people participate in sacred making activities…according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological.” Hervieu-Léger similarly notes that the ‘sacred’ may be found in both religious and secular contexts, and qualifies the ‘religious’ as “the production, management and distribution of the particular form of believing which draws its legitimacy from reference to a tradition.” The ‘tradition’ in this study relates to Islam, and it is therefore crucial to provide an overview of the many ways in which the ‘sacred’ is ‘Islamically’ constituted, paying particular attention to mosques and the Friday Jummah prayer.

The term ‘sacred’ has itself been described as not resonating positively with Muslims. This may be for a number of reasons. As has already been alluded to in the introduction to this essay, the dichotomisation of the sacred and secular worlds is arguably born of a Western Christian milieu which cannot be simplistically related to the Islamic tradition. As Espositio has noted, traditional Islamic societies (at least theoretically) provided the sacred with “…no special retreats and the secular had no boundless freedom outside them.” Rather Islamic thought promoted the ideal that “all time is sacred time” and sought to hold in balance worldly and religious concerns by “affirm[ing] the essential sacredness of any halal (permitted) activity.” Additionally, the contemporary reluctance to appropriate the very term ‘sacred’ has been linked to a “normative Muslim resistance to sacralizing any object and thus risking shirk (polytheism).”

Unlike in various forms of Christianity, there is no formal means of consecrating a ‘sacred’ space in Islam. Barbara Metcalf notes “the utter “portability” of Islamic ritual” and therefore how Muslim ritual requires no “sacred place” for its practice. Indeed, Islamic conceptions of the sacred and sacred space are in keeping with the situational model of sacred

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36 Tamimi and Esposito (2000) p. 89
37 Bennett (1994) p.91
38 Ibid. p. 89
39 Metcalf (1996) p.63
40 Metcalf (1994) p.92
41 Metcalf (1996) p.6
space, thus far outlined, by highlighting the importance of religious practice - in place and
time - over and above an experientially influenced designation of sacred space. Metcalf notes
“it is ritual and sanctioned practice that is prior and that creates “Muslim space”, which thus
does not require any juridically claimed territory or formally consecrated or architecturally
specific space.” \(^{42}\) As such, any place or building can be set aside as a ‘masjid’ literally ‘a
place of prostration’ \(^{43}\) and historically mosque sites “have been used for everything from
doing business to levying troops” \(^{44}\). The hadith of the Prophet Mohammed articulates this
attitude: “Wherever the hour of prayer overtakes thee, thou shalt perform the prayer and that
is a masjid.” \(^{45}\)

However, Clinton Bennett argues that although theoretically the sacred can be found
everywhere, Islam recognises that “if people lack anything on which they can specifically
focus their awareness of the sacred, it will be too diffuse, too general, to fulfil their spiritual
and psychological needs for nourishment”. Therefore for practical purposes Islam does have
a concept of the “sacred place” whilst simultaneously it promotes the notion that all space is
in fact sacred and may be sacralised by “extending the ‘sacred’ into the ‘secular’.” \(^{46,47}\) We
therefore arrive at a set of affairs, in which we might speak of degrees of sacredness wherein
“…fundamentally, no place is more sacred than any other…This suggest that those places
that are regarded as especially sacred fulfil, primarily, symbolic functions…” \(^{48}\)

Notably, the Arabic word used to designate the sacredness of a place is ‘haraam’. This word
translates literally as ‘prohibited’, and thereby alludes to the new behavioural norms that
govern such sacred environments in which certain acts are especially forbidden. Places that
enable this awareness of the sacred in the Islamic tradition have therefore included mosques
and shrines, as well as more specifically the three cities of Mecca (the site of Masjid al
Haraam, The Sacred Sanctuary), Medina (the site of the Prophet’s mosque) and Jerusalem
(the site of Masjid al Aqsa, where it is reputed that the Prophet ascended to the heavens). \(^{49}\)

**Mosques**

The mosque has been described as “preeminent symbol of Muslim sacred space” \(^{50}\). It is a
place that whilst not formally consecrated, “takes on a resonance as the place set aside for
prayers, which are undertaken after ritual cleansing” \(^{51}\). The epithet of archetypal mosque in
Islam is claimed by the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. Nevertheless there are numerous

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\(^{42}\) Metcalf (1996) p.3  
\(^{43}\) Bennett (1994) p.90  
\(^{44}\) Metcalf (1996) p. 6  
\(^{46}\) Bennett (1994) p.89  
\(^{47}\) Bennett (1994) p. 89  
\(^{48}\) Bennett (1994) p.93  
\(^{49}\) Bennett (1994) p.90  
\(^{50}\) Burke, E. and Abrahamian, E. 1990. Islam, Politics, and Social Movements, University of California Press, p. 121  
evidences taken from the hadith and historical literature which lead to the opinion that that this archetypal mosque “had nothing of the character of a sacred edifice”\textsuperscript{52} such that

“People sat as they pleased in the mosque or took their ease lying on their backs…disputes took place over business…and in general, people conducted themselves as they pleased.”\textsuperscript{53}

Therefore it becomes clear that the notion of sacrality for a masjid as being a place of worship, including for the archetypal Prophet’s mosque, fought alongside an alternative, equally Islamic tradition, which saw the entire space as a social centre, often indistinguishable in use from the world outside of it. Hillenbrand notes that these “two points of view cannot be distinguished in Islam, especially in the earliest period” and that for later mosques “it depended on circumstances whether the aspect of the mosque as a social centre or a place of prayer was more or less emphasised.”\textsuperscript{54}

Mosques in the UK

Estimates vary wildly regarding the numbers of mosques in the UK, and range from between 1500 to 3000 mosques\textsuperscript{55}. Mosques in the United Kingdom, and by extension, those in the Western world that serve communities in primarily non-Muslim settings, have developed to perform a number of functions that would be regarded as a-typical in traditional Muslim societies. The migrant trajectories of a substantial proportion of the Muslim communities in Britain ensured that the earliest mosques in the 1950s through to the 1970s catered only for male migrant labourers.\textsuperscript{56} Following the relinquishment of the ‘myth of return’ mosques were transformed into sites accommodating younger generations, offering services to the youth in religious education and being a locus for the religious community’s life.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore Sean McLoughlin argues that “since the 1980s at least, some mosques in Britain have also functioned as advice centres for the unemployed, Members of Parliament’s surgeries, homework clubs, youth centres, elderly day-care centres, and spaces to prepare food for communal gatherings such as weddings.”\textsuperscript{58}

According to a report by the Institute for Community Cohesion in 2008, mosques are an integral part of British Muslim communities, with high attendance rates for Friday Prayers even amongst “nominally practising Muslims”:

\textsuperscript{52} Hillibrand, R. Mosques, Encyclopaedia of Islam Two, Brill Publishers. Retrieved 18-12-12.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Brown, K. 2008. The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community. The British Journal of Politics & International Relations, 10: p.474
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
“The constitution of the British Muslim population means that mosques are mainly drawn from the Bareli, Deobandi and Salafi denominations. The report further noted that Muslims were more likely to “worship in a Masjid [sic.] [mosque] with others from a similar ethnic background and religious practice. Accordingly, most Masajids and likewise Madrasas [supplementary schools] are established and administered along theological and most often corresponding ethnic lines.”

Friday Jummah and the Khutba

The word khutba can be used for any form of address and discursive speech. Islamic forms of ritual address are made on various occasions in the Muslim year in addition to the Friday prayer, such as on the day of Eid or at the conclusion of a marriage contract. The khutba on the day of Jummah comprises of four sections, however the khutba proper consists of two addresses. The subject of the khutba varies according to the Imam, however it is “essentially a weekly message of reminding the faithful of their commitment to Islamic morality—the awamir and nawahi (obligations and prohibitions, respectively).” These obligations may vary from the personal to the societal “from drinking, eating and dressing to the virtues of cleanliness, honesty, modesty and chastity; and from social manners and greetings, to duties and obligations to parents, kin, neighbours, the needy, and to the state and society.”

The content of the sermon is of considerable political significance. It was often an indication of submission to political authority as the caliph would have originally presided over the prayers in person, and it remained necessary in Islamic history for other mosques “to make a link with the sovereign by mentioning his name in the du’a (supplication)” Additionally Ahmed argues that the “Friday sermon” is “designed to link (deen) faith with duniya (worldly affairs)” however in conversation with a number of Muslim elites he argues:

“It is generally argued that the mosques continue to propagate an Islam in which reductive notions of piety, demonstrated through appearance (beard, scarf), ritual observance and unquestioned acceptance (taqlid) are regarded as supreme Islamic virtues and learning, scholarship, ethics or public service have been excised from core Islamic values”.

Women and Mosques

Katherine Brown notes that “Given the importance of mosques to the formation of Islamic identities and communities, it is not unsurprising, therefore, to find that they become sites of

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61 Ibid. pg 214
63 Ahmed (2012) p.183
64 Ibid. p. 177
negotiation for Muslim women seeking to assert their agency, identity and rights“65. A major obstacle to women’s participation in mosques are systems of segregation or the non-provision of space. Mosques are typically segregated referring to the separation of male and female space in mosques. The male congregants often have access to the main space for prayer, whereas women are in most mosques “confined to praying behind barriers that obstruct their view of the imam, and/or prevent the male worshippers from seeing them”66. In Islamic law however “there is no scholarly consensus on either excluding women from the mosque entirely, or on segregating men and women”.67 These issues are however significant for women’s participation in mosque life and how they are defined in the sacred space of the mosque.

In a study conducted by the Muslim Council of Britain and Channel 4 News, it was identified that 40 per cent of UK mosques currently have provisions for female worshippers. Furthermore, a Leicester survey showed that less than 2 per cent of trustees on mosque committees were women.68 Ahmed identifies this state of affairs as the ‘masculinisation of mosques’69. Conversely, some women in Ahmed’s study of Muslim elites argued that the issue of inclusivity was a ‘red herring’, instead respondents argued that the “mosque is peripheral to women’s religious performance and identity’ being far more concerned by issues of personal rights, education, wellbeing and domestic equality70.

In seeking to counteract the wider issue of gender inequality affecting both the mosques and the broader Muslim community, Muslim feminists including Amina Wudud, Asma Barlas and Fatima Mernissi have sought to bring attention to the problem of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts “based on decontextualized and dehistoricised readings of the Quran and selective emphasis on a few Hadith (traditions of the Prophet) which are argued to diminish women’s position in Islam.”71

Part II- Methodology and Method

Choice of Material

The use of the internet, and more specifically social networking media as a data source enabled the provision of high quality data on the research question, whilst also impacting upon the chosen method of data analysis.

66 Woodlock, R. 2010. The masjid is for men: competing voices in the debate about Australian Muslim women's access to mosques, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 21:1, p.54
67 Woodlock (2010) p.54
68 Dyke (2009) p.7
69 Ahmed (2012) p.185
70 Ibid. p.184
71 Ibid. p.173
The choice of the YouTube video “Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jummah” and its associated comments as the research material for the study, was enabled by a friend who, being aware of my research interests in Muslims in Britain, forwarded me a link to the video by email. I was immediately interested in the video for its bold and unorthodox challenge of religious authority, as well as the depth of emotional response it had generated by the commentators who watched it. Notably, it also seemingly encompassed my interests in political activism and gender studies.

In order to determine the viability of the video and its comments as a data source, it was necessary for me to study the applicability of internet and social networking media as data sources, and more specifically their relationship with online Muslim networks.

Cyber-Islamic environments

The sphere of the Muslim Internet, which Gary Bunt labels “Cyber-Islamic environments”, is a place where “actors are drawn into the discursive and symbolic contestation over Islam” 72. Bunt analyses the plethora of reasons for which Muslims may choose to engage their religious identities with the internet and describes those who do so as iMuslims. Bunt’s designation of a Muslim as an iMuslim is more than just an individual connected to the internet, rather it suggests an ‘intensity’ of ‘interactivity’ which may take many forms. Notably, it encompasses individuals who “…may be using the internet as a form of media and public relations to effectively put across a message to a local or global audience” and more specifically “An iMuslim may be campaigning on a specific issue, using social networking tools and uploading video messages via YouTube 73.”

From such studies it became clear that the unique interaction of Muslims from a variety of backgrounds with the internet would make the choice of internet based research particularly productive.

Social Networking Media and YouTube

YouTube is an example of social networking media, but it does not easily fit within the category. Boyd and Ellison define social network sites as

“…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.” 74

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While YouTube certainly fits all of these requirements, unlike Facebook and Twitter it is more specifically tailored to the uploading of video messages and other multimedia as a central medium of communication. Furthermore while Facebook and Twitter require users to have their own account in order to view and interact with the content and other users, YouTube provides the ability for interaction between registered users who may upload, favourite, rate, and comment on videos, but additionally it also enables access to a wider public of unregistered users, although such interaction is limited to viewing materials and comments of registered users.

YouTube’s exposure and ability to interact with a broader audience is developed further when one acknowledges that social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace “…often (though not exclusively) feature interactions between users who also have interpersonal connections offline, potentially resulting in homogeneous networks of likeminded individuals interacting with one another in the networked space.”

Contrastingly, YouTube’s ‘openly accessible content’ means that “site visitors could be more likely to be exposed to a heterogeneous online network where other users, content, and opinions reflect a diversity of political perspectives”.

The YouTube comments section may be described as similar to a discussion forum in which members can post responses or additions to a comment made by a user or themselves. Apart from if a user chooses to withhold a comment after they have posted it, or if the comment is flagged by administrators as offensive and subsequently removed, “the content and flow of discussions are determined by the members themselves which make these discussions particularly useful.” Furthermore it is notable that these comments may not have emerged if not for the multimedia platform and comments’ section of the YouTube website.

**Implications**

The democratising potential of the internet is particularly significant for this study. Jon Anderson describes the internet’s ability to facilitate and link together previously disparate and novel interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices in an ‘extended discursive space’, “marked by new techniques not only for interpretation but also for creating a public that lies between, draws on, and links previously discrete discourses.” The Lioness’ particular form of religo-political activism is arguably an example of such a ‘discrete discourse’, which the internet provides exposure and more crucially a ‘discursive space’. Indeed Bunt notes that “social-networking sites, blogs, and other ‘cyber-Islamic environments’ have exposed

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76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
Muslims to new influences outside the traditional spheres of Islamic knowledge and authority."

Furthermore, in view of YouTube’s ability to overcome ‘self-selecting’ networks influenced by offline behaviours, it arguably provides the best possible means of any social networking website to acquire a diverse audience range, and therefore the broadest perspectives from comments on sacredness, as is possible in the context of a qualitative internet study. Notwithstanding the above, studies still show YouTube posters to be overwhelmingly male and relatively young. Moreover since a small proportion of viewers comment on a video, the extent to which comments can give audience insights is limited.

This study does however note that studies using internet based resources can benefit from a mixed methods approach. Traditional qualitative interviewing would be able to provide additional information from the perspective of the research subjects, more specifically tailored toward answering the research question. Roislien in a critical discussion of Facebook as a research tool in the study of contemporary religion argues that it has three primary methodological functions, all of which are equally applicable to this study: “it is a Gate-Keeper that enables identification and recruitment of interviewees; it is a hub containing a variety of data; and, it is a Gateway for validation of data”.

Online and Offline Realities

Qualitative research of online communications on social networking websites presents particular challenges to a researcher when compared to traditional qualitative research methods. The question of how data in an internet mediated, text based environment differs from that collected in person is an important one for this study. Annette Markham notes “the importance of text in a person’s construction and negotiation of identity in online text based environments”, whereas existence in an offline context can be taken for granted simply by one being physically present:

“Socioeconomic makers such as body type, gender, race and class are sued to make sense of participants in physical settings. Online these frames are still used but without visual information they function invisibly”.

The researcher must be conscious of the fact that he will instinctively identify makers of gender, race and class when text is analysed. It therefore becomes necessary for the researcher to be particularly reflective so as not to read into the text identity markers incorrectly, in order to contextualise an interpretation of the text. This issue particularly relates to YouTube over other social networking sites, as the social networking site only

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81 Bunt (2009) p.280
85 Ibid. p.799
provides information pertaining to the location of a commenter. The age or gender of the user must be inferred from the comments made by the user or other material available on their user account, which can be particularly ambiguous.

Observation and Participation (Reflexivity)

The researcher took an observer role in this study, analysing text comments on the YouTube website by numerous respondents. This was not therefore an ethnographic study in which the researcher sought to embed himself in the online environment of a community of internet users, making decisions regarding whom to interact with and what to say to participants, which would overtly affect the content of the comments made by the research subjects. Clarifying the observer status of the researcher from a participant role is by no means a claim to objectivity. Qualitative research involving highly participatory methods requires a far greater concern with reflexivity during the initial stages of data collection. A major advantage of the observer role which uses non-reactive data is that “the data collection process is not influenced by those being researched”. As such the research subjects ‘cannot respond in a socially desirable way’. The disadvantage is that “no additional information can be assessed that is not publicly available”.86 The comments of the research participants generated in a non-fabricated context were treated as archival material, with any additional user comments on the website made after the research project had begun left unincorporated into the study.

Notwithstanding the above, regardless of whether the researcher is an observer or participant, or engaged in offline or online research, the resulting research report “will present a particular reality of the object of analysis that is influenced by the identity and [relative] participation of the researcher”.87 This participatory role is rooted in the interpretation of the responses of research participants:

“Interpretative focus and the nature of the findings shift with the passage of time, the venue for publication, the credibility of the author or notoriety of the subject and innumerable other factors.”88

The researcher’s initial choice of using the social networking site YouTube as the data source, over alternative and perhaps lesser known social media networking websites with multimedia capabilities can be seen as on such decision which “creates an audience that previously did not exist and indicates to the larger academic community that this context is meaningful”.89

The consequence of the understanding that the research report is the result of a very specific interaction between the researcher and the online mediated subject is the demand for a reflexive approach to qualitative research, particularly in the analysis stage of the project. Abbas notes:

87 Markham (2000) p.802
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
“The more researchers can be self-conscious and pronounce their role in the research process and in the production of outputs, the greater readers can connect in an emblematical dialogue with the author(s) and the more there is conviction in the study itself.”

Insider Research

I am a 23 year old male, the son of South Asian migrants to Britain, and describe myself formally as a British Muslim. I occupy multiple subjectivities in relation to the research – as a man, student, Muslim, British-Pakistani, minority. As a Muslim, brought up in the United Kingdom, I undeniably have a perspective on what constitutes sacred space in Islam and an opinion about the research question of this study.

The perception of being too close to the subject matter either by virtue of a commonly held identity or significant experience of a particular field is seen either as an advantage or limitation depending upon the viewpoint of the social scientist. For example, the increased literacy of cultural expressions and awareness of idiosyncrasies among native Arabic speakers was exploited in a research project which analysed jihadi website forums. The study argued:

“…native speakers of the Arabic from the Middle East who are also Sunni Muslim will produce a more accurate or authentic reading of the discussions (in anthropological terms emic accounts) than the interpretations of coders who do not have all these attributes (etic accounts).”

Brar contends that researchers who share ethnic and religious identities with their research participants enable research that is more ‘ethnically correct’ because of the reduced likelihood of stereotyping. Scholars influenced by post modernism and feminist viewpoints have decried the positivist assumptions of those recommending the ethnic and religious matching of research participants and researchers. That is to say, the notion that accounts rendered from such interactions are somehow more ‘accurate’ and less ‘biased’. This assumes “the existence of a single objective ‘truth’ that can be tapped into” by using researchers of the appropriate race or ethnic background.

This study does not subscribe to the assumption that ethnic or religious matching is preferable for the analysing of research data. It is important to note that despite being a Muslim, I like other researchers occupy multiple subjectivities which may or may not differ from the experiential accounts of the respondents. The Muslim community is extremely diverse, but it


91 Erez, Weimann, Weisburd (2011) p. 119


93 Sin, C. 2007. Ethnic-matching in qualitative research: reversing the gaze on `white others, Qualitative Research 2007 7: 477
is typical of any social research context that there are numerous relations between the researcher and the researched: “there is no hegemonic form of “otherness”"^94. Furthermore the assumption that as a Muslim researcher I can provide superior and more constructive analysis of research material may well result in the study providing results that are indeed tailored more to my own reflections on the issue then the subject’s actual responses.

Ethical Reflections

A major ethical concern in the literature of online qualitative research with implications for this study was whether information publically available online, such as the comments on publically accessible social networking websites, can be ethically used in research studies without the prior permission of the individual authors. Whilst the use of this information is undoubtedly legal, the ethical issue arises given that the authors may be unsuspecting individuals who, at the time of writing their opinions, would not likely have considered that their comments would later be analysed and published in social research studies.

With regard to this study, one means of overcoming this ethical quandary would be to contact each commenter through the YouTube website’s social networking function and acquire permission for the use of such information. Upon consideration, this was found to be impractical given (i) the numbers of commenters involved in the study and (ii) the fact that a number were incontactable as a result of the closure of their registered YouTube account.

This study endorses Kozinets’ perspective on the issue when he argues that so long as the researcher does not interact with the researched subjects, the internet material may be treated as a form of publication:

“Analysing online community or culture communications or their archives is not human subjects research if the researcher does not record the identity of the communicators and if the researcher can legally and easily gain access to these communications or archives.”^95

Data Analysis Method

Quantitative Analysis

In order to get an overall view of the user’s comments, quantitative manual coding of a number of variables was undertaken to include:

i) the number of commenters
ii) the number of comments
iii) the frequency of particular topics discussed by commentators
iv) viewpoint of the comment on the Lioness’ actions (positive, negative, ambivalent, inconclusive, withheld, islamophobic)

^94Abbas (2010) p.128
To code the topics, categories were developed using a bottom-up, constant comparison of the videos.

An e-tool\textsuperscript{96} was then used to help provide diagrammatical depictions of the relationship between the commenters including:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[i)] \textit{ReplyTo network}
  \item[ii)] \textit{Subscription network}
  \item[iii)] \textit{Subscriptions in common network}
\end{itemize}

**Qualitative Analysis**

Content analysis was the primary means of analysing user comments on the social networking website, YouTube, which hosts the video “Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jummah”. The data was analysed using ‘grounded’ theory principles.

Content analysis follows a “systematic, rule based and step by step process” which produces a “system of categories to structure and analyse data”.\textsuperscript{97} Feedback loops during the course of analysis enables the revision of categories according to the data.

Content analysis was determined to be the most suitable method of data analysis for a number of reasons:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[i)] It is receptive to issues that arise during the interpretation stage. As such categories and theory can be continually amended in accordance with the data.
  \item[ii)] It is “particularly suitable to analysing communications and examining their manifest and latent meanings”\textsuperscript{98}.
  \item[iii)] It can process large quantities of data, particularly through the use of quantitative stages which can be embedded into the research process, countering “the frequently criticized dichotomy between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’”.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{itemize}

**Process Reflections**

The research frame of sacred space was considered at an early stage of the research endeavour. Having watched the Lioness’ video and cursorily viewed the comments on the YouTube website by users, it was considered appropriate to conduct a preliminary review of literature regarding sacred space.

Early social scientists recommend an ideal of having no a-priori knowledge of literature in order to prevent contamination of data with biases\textsuperscript{100}. Levi Strauss, however, later

\begin{itemize}
  \item[96] The e-research tool was developed by Mike Thelwall, Professor in Information Science at Wolverhampton University. It is freely available for non-commercial use at http://cybermetrics.wlv.ac.uk/
  \item[97] Ehnert (2009) p.190
  \item[98] Erez, Weimann, Weisburd (2011) p.52
  \item[99] Flick, U., Von Kardoff, E. and Steinke, I. 2004, \textit{A Companion to Qualitative Research}. London: Sage p.269
  \item[100] Ray, N. 2008, Vulnerability to Human Trafficking: A Qualitative Study, ProQuest p.37
\end{itemize}
acknowledged the usefulness of a prior study of literature to bring to the field some concepts and relationship that can be checked against the actual data\textsuperscript{101}. A literature review of academic texts pertaining to sacred space and the Muslim community in Britain was therefore undertaken prior to the systematic analysis of the data to make myself as a researcher sensitive to what to look for.

In accordance with content analysis’ receptivity to the data during the process of categorisation, it became clear that the issue of gender in sacred space was a significant theme. The data therefore led me to further reading surrounding the issue of gender in Muslim communities and in sacred spaces, which enabled a better understanding of the data, and was subsequently added to the literature review.

The users’ comments analysed encompassed the ‘about’ section of the video, which can be understood as the Lioness’ commentary about the events taking place on the video and her motivations behind her actions. As such she was treated as both a protagonist in the study and a member of the online Muslim community, with an opinion like other commenters on the issue of sacred space. Not all of the comments related to the research question under study, such as a discussion thread which evolved into an argument concerning the unacceptability of Shi’ite beliefs for Sunni Muslims. These comments were therefore regarded as irrelevant and removed from the data set.

All of the comments ranging from the date of upload until the 1\textsuperscript{st} December 2012 constituted data for the study, totalling 599 comments, with any comments made after this date not applicable to the study. The number of comments was determined to be manageable to process and for categorisation, and as a result a sampling method was not needed.

Given the many forms of internet adapted language used by commenters, scholars have noted that internet research may involve ‘correcting’ unique spellings which thus “misrepresent a participants’ deliberate presentation of self” however “for readability, alteration of a person’s desired online identity may be the price of smooth reading”\textsuperscript{102}. This was necessary on occasion to enable easy comprehension of the comments by some YouTube posters. Lastly, where necessary Arabic and Islamic terms have been translated into English for ease of understanding and placed in square brackets beside the text.

\textsuperscript{101} Straus and Corbin (1990)

\textsuperscript{102} Markham (2000) p. 807
Part III - Findings and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis

These statistics were correct as of 1st December 2012 for the video and comments hosted on the YouTube website URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K42Nyxaqu0 entitled, [LIVE] Lioness of Allah Shames Imam at Jummah, produced by the YouTube channel Lioness Mehdjahid. The video had amassed 15,776 views since 9th September 2011 when it was published on YouTube.

i) the number of commenters

There are a sum total of 220 commentators. Whilst individualised data was not available on the commenters, statistics provided by the YouTube website show that the primary demographic of these commenters were males in the following order of frequency: 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 18-24 years.

ii) the number of comments

The video has 599 comments (as of 1/12/12). These comments range from the video’s inception and it has continued to generate interest to date.

iii) the frequency of particular topics discussed by commentators

Palestine: 25
Politics in the mosque: 33
Etiquette during the Khutba: 456
Gendered behaviours in the mosque: 59
Government and state surveillance of the Mosque: 9
Competency of Imams: 16

*Where single comments treated multiple themes, multiple topics were recorded as being discussed.

   iv) Viewpoint of the comment on the Lioness’ actions

Positive: 113
Negative: 253
(including those agreeing with principle but not the action: 22)
Ambivalent: 7
Irrelevant: 194
Islamophobic: 9
Withheld: 23

   v) Abusive comments:

Directed against Lioness: 30
Directed against those abusive to Lioness: 2
Directed against Imams: 2
Other: 9
Total: 43

Notably there were also 10 instances in which commenters’ showed displeasure with the level of abusive language which was being used on the forum, both against the Lioness and in general.

Relationships between Commenters

ReplyTo network:
The nodes in the network are users that commented on the video. The size of each node is proportional to the number of comments left on the video by the commenter. As such it becomes clear that paki3cx and SALAFIMEDIAUK are among the users who comments most on the video. Arrows between users are drawn to indicate that one user replied to comments by another user. The thickness of an arrow is proportional to the number of replies made. 97 nodes (commenters) appear in this diagram, showing that roughly half of the commenters engage in discussion on the YouTube comments forum.

* Black arrows indicate predominantly negative comments, while red arrows indicate predominantly positive comments. As this was carried out by an e-tool which would have been unable to take into account much of the Islamic terminology - often in transliterated Arabic - this study has relied upon this computer analysis, preferring to manually ascertain the numbers of positive and negative comments.

Subscription network:
Arrows are drawn between users to indicate that one user subscribes to the channel of the other. Subscription in YouTube is a non-symmetrical relationship that allows one user to quickly access the videos produced by the other. Of 116 nodes (commenters) analysed, there are 21 arrows showing an interrelationship between 26 commenters. It is therefore reasonable to presume that the vast majority of commenters are not drawn from online personal networks.

* Only 116 commenters were analysed by the computer program from the 220 commenters identified as having posted about the video. This is likely to be the result of the tool’s inability to access profile information of the remaining accounts due to their subsequent closure.

Subscriptions in common network:
Lines between users are drawn to indicate that two users have common channel subscriptions in YouTube. The thickness of a line between two users is proportional to the number of common channel subscriptions that they have. The outlying nodes identify those users who do not subscribe to YouTube channels in common with other users. Whilst it is difficult to identify the nature of the YouTube channels shared in common by the majority of the users (such as religious, political, personal, comic channels), it is instructive to note that the majority of the users are highly interconnected in terms of sharing common subscription of YouTube channels, with only a small minority of 10 recorded users not participating in a single shared common network.

**Discussion**

Mike Thelwall in his study *Commenting on YouTube Videos: From Guatemalan Rock to El Big Bang* argues that those videos discussing religious themes were likely to produce the greatest number of comments and discussion:

“The biggest trigger of discussion seemed to be religion, whereas the videos attracting the least discussion were predominantly from the Music, Comedy and How to & Style categories. This suggests different audience uses for YouTube: from passive entertainment to active debating.”

The Lioness’ video would seem to be inkeeping with data that suggests religiously themed videos generate proportionally greater numbers of comments and subsequent discussion from those watching online videos. Thelwall’s study found that an average figure of 0.5% of total viewers leave comments on a YouTube video, “one comment for every 204 views of a YouTube Video”. The Lioness’s video saw 3.8% of total viewers leaving a comment on the YouTube video’s page, which would account for a percentage increase of 760% from the average response rate.

Despite the higher comment rate generated by the Lioness’s video in comparison to statistical data about average YouTube video comment rates, these figures should not be misinterpreted as providing an authentic reflection of the wider internet community or the offline Muslim public’s attitudes toward the video. Madden refers to a US survey which shows that 13% of users watching online videos had posted comments about them. Therefore not only are the numbers of individuals having watched the video, relatively small in comparison to the size of the British Muslim community, but only a small proportion of viewers commented on a video. As such the extent to which comments can give audience insights is limited.

A study of a news forum has shown that “negativity sustains discussions because the longest threads tended to have negative sentiments expressed at their beginning”. This is certainly true of the Lioness’s video, and as such concern must be shown not to exaggerate the extent to which the numbers of negative comments on the web page (which are greater than the

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103 Thelwall and Sud (2011) p.1
104 3.7969%
106 Thelwall and Sud (2011) p. 3
number of positive comments) can be reasonably said to be indicative of the opinion of those who have watched the video. Mike Thelwall notes in his study:

“Although negative sentiment was uncommon, it was more prevalent in comments for videos attracting many comments; conversely positive sentiment was disproportionately common in videos attracting few comments. Thus, it seems that negativity can drive commenting – perhaps partly through long running acrimonious comment-based discussions.”

Qualitative Analysis

Is the space sacred?

A majority of the comments do not explicitly discuss the video or the actions of the Lioness with reference to sacred or holy places. Indeed a degree of inference must be made in order to successfully gage the wealth of opinion concerning the degree to which it is believed that desecration of sacred space has or has not occurred, and more fundamentally whether the commenter believes the space to be sacred. As has been noted previously, Muslim show a general unwillingness to use terms such as ‘sacred’ in describing what may otherwise legitimately be identified as places of sacred significance. Indeed there is no mention of the word ‘sacred’ in all of the 599 comments, two mentions of ‘sanctity’ of the mosque, and only two instances in which the word ‘holy’ is used in relation to space:

**BillyDaKyd**
I agree with your views sister but the way you put it across and raised your voice in a holy place is not acceptable..

**Qassimax**
WHY WERE YOU NOT PRAYING THE JUMUAA AT THAT TIME ?
Or is the duty to ALLAH (3aza wa Jal) less important than spreading FITNA at a holy time of worship ?...

**1jiatin 1 year ago**
…what she did was a prime example of a person filled with self importance and disregard for the sanctity of a masjid one should refrain from even raising their voice in a m[osque]

These examples although being few in number do significantly show that sacredness and its associated words ‘holy’ and ‘sanctity’, identify the mosque as sacred space, and in one instance locate this sanctity as bounded by time referring to the “holy time of worship”.

Whilst the commenters may differ on the specific nature of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in the space, they unanimously concur that the site has a function in the performance of ritual –the Jummah prayer - and that there is a code of conduct which must be observed in order to preserve this ritual function and respect for the religious beliefs

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107 Ibid. p.14
associated with it. This is in concordance with the situational definition of sacred space as put forward by Jonathan Smith:

**NusaybahBintKa3b**
Whether you like it or not what she did is against Islam. No one is suppose to speak during the Khutbah. Not even to tell someone to be quiet.

**marwouan**
Don't talk during the jumu'a even if i agree with you, what a shame what a shame what a shame

**FeeAmaanillahMVT**
You've gone against the prophet (sa). You're not allowed to speak during the Khutbah. Repent

**bhym1**
Do you guys not realize that interrupting the Khutba is haram [forbidden]. If you have a point to make then you should make it at an appropriate time and place.

The concern with observing silence during the khutba in accordance with a prophetic hadith provokes the idea that “the environment which embodies the sacred must struggle under human labour to maintain its sense of sacred from more quotidian activities that may easily engulf the space” such as simply speaking.

This code of conduct is more explicitly articulated, with evidential proofs by commenter sunnibro12:

**sunnibro12**
It is not permissible to speak even if it is to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil. Even though this (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil) is one of the most important duties of the Muslim, it is not allowed at this time (during the Khutbah) and one cannot even say "shush!" or "listen!" This is based on the following evidence:

It was reported from Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "If you say to your companion 'Listen!' whilst the Imam is delivering sermon on Friday, you have spoken laghw (idle talk)."
(Reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

You see, even if you say to a person: "Listen!" -- which is enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil -- Islam counts this as idle talk, which is forbidden at the time of Jumu'ah.

A smaller number of commenters, who also consider the sacred space to have been impacted upon negatively, choose not to refer to the Prophetic stipulation mandating silence on the congregation but a more general Islamic ethic which encourages harmony and not discord. The latter being identified with the actions of the Lioness:

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Hafiz Hamza

…The prophet SAW said: I can guarantee a house in Jannah who can CONTROL this” and he pointed to his tongue.

[Haddeeth Saheeh]

Notice how the blessed messenger SAW used the word control!...

InspireClips

Just as the Prophet (saw) didn’t kick someone out of the masjid, he also would never interrupt any religious service the way this 'Lioness' did.

One can also find experiential definitions of sacredness, being implicitly referred to by the commenters. Often this is through the use of charged rhetoric, but also in the use of abusive language against the Lioness, or on occasion against her detractors. This is arguably indicative of the level of offence that has occurred, which is proportional to the emotional attachment and sacred significance the commenter attaches to the space, which he/she believes to have been desecrated in some form. As DontJudgeFudge notes in response to a commenter who argues that there has been an overreaction of purported disgust by a multitude of posters: “I had to downplay a LOT of my emotions after seeing this actually, so don't try and sugar-coat her mistake….” Examples of such wealth of feeling include:

TheMuslim0

May Allâh destroy her, may Allâh cut off her legs if she doesn’t repent, Allâhomma âmîn.

easyonetwothree

May Allâh guide her, look how she destroyed the perfect atmosphere of Salaatul jumu'ah…

NioKoiN

You disgust me, may Allah subhanataallahh guide you, In Shaa Allah

fazz993

I find this DISGUSTING as a muslim. Who even dares to raise their voice in a mosque and shout like that PLUS during a Khutbah? I supported the Acts of this sister till i saw this. My blood boiled when i saw this astaghfirullah..

These comments use hyperbolic language when describing the actions of the Lioness, including “disgusting” and “shameful”. One commenter argues that she has “destroyed” the sacredness of the space through her actions, whilst another describes her reaction to watching the video as “my blood boiled”. Many additionally use the Arabic phrase “astagfarullah”, literally translated as “I seek the forgiveness of God” but more colloquially used to indicate intense disapproval or shame.

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109 This is by no means to justify the abusive and at times illegal language, but to seek to understand the role such language plays in conceptualising sacred space.
Those commenters who support the Lioness, do not deny the sacred aspect of the prayer space, but rather feel that the Lioness’ actions do not necessarily constitute desecration. That is to say, they believe the code of conduct which maintains the sacred space is sufficiently flexible to encompass her intervention. In accordance with the situational model of sacred space, an alternative code of conduct in an area dedicated to the performance of ritual (the Jummah prayer in the mosque) is referred to by those commenters who seek to validate the Lioness’ actions:

**abz2000123**

women raised their voices in the prophet's mosque….may Allah reward her with good in this world and in eternity

abz2000123 then proceeds to provide favourable evidence from the time of the Caliph Umar which demonstrates that a woman interrupted the khutba without sanction. UmmKhilafah having similarly noted the incidence involving Umar argues:

**UmmKhilafah**

Can you people now see speaking in front of men is not haram, and neither is correcting the Imam openly, as a women correct Umar ibn alkhattab in front of the entire congregation. No one pushed her out and told her to shut up. Even her image is described as a dark women with pink cheeks. So they saw who she was.

Politics and sacred space

Politics and sacred space is a broad thematic categorisation to encompass a number of perspectives provided by commenters, which highlight the interrelationship between political activism and sacred space.

Firstly it is important to note that a majority of the commenters who have previously been identified as being in disagreement with the actions of the Lioness do not seem to inform their disapproval with a political standpoint. Their disapproval stems from the manner of the Lioness’ ‘intervention’ into the Friday prayer, rather than an expressed ideologically informed antagonism to a politically infused sacred space. As such many of the comments argue for the Lioness to use designated channels in which to express her grievances rather than a public platform during a time of worship:

**ImThinkingShhhh** 1 year ago

Ok what do you want the Imam to do? I believe this girl is a attention seeker this is what the kafir [unbelievers] do scream and shut. She could have gone to the imam privately and asked him to speak about palestine but no she wanted attention

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Rather, a number of commenters argue show sympathy with the Lioness’ political attitudes but direct her not to desecrate the sacred space by using a different method of activism:

**7rox1990** 1 year ago
Sister I have met u at demos in the past n I know your heart is in the right place n u have a point (most Imams do little to notify the masses a Jummah about the Muslim plight n the duty of Muslims to restore Justice n honour)- but that was not the way to make it, nor was it the conduct I expected from a sister who is passionate about defending Muslims.
Think twice next time Insha'Allah

**IslamIzzDeen** 1 month ago
This sister has a very good point which is quite true. however, it's a shame that she acted in the manner she did which was totally unacceptable and disrespectful. She should of approached the imam after the Salah with her concerns and opinions and have a proper dialog, not this nonsense.

Conversely, it is worth questioning whether some of these suggestions are disingenuous when placed in the context of the widespread distrust and accusations of inadequate mosque leadership commonly levelled against mosque committees. That is to say, do some of the commenters refer the Lioness to mosque committees they already know to be resistant to her demands. Waqar Ahmed in a study on the attitudes of Muslim elites towards mosques and imams notes:

“Mosques have failed not only to provide leadership at times of adversity (with some exceptions; see Samad 1992) but even to acknowledge community issues as legitimate concerns for them...”

As such, do these commenters tacitly support the status quo arrangement that identifies political activism as being legitimately divorced from the ritual nature of Friday prayer, and moreover potentially a threat to its sacred constitution. Notably most of the commenters choose to assume that the Lioness has not already embarked upon the more formal process of expressing her grievance to the imam or mosque committee, and fail to address the question of what should be done if they choose to be unresponsive. In this regard the response of jihadifanclub is atypical:

**jihadifanclub**
No one knows the situation behind the event, maybe she did ask him and he already said "no". I know I have asked multiple people to speak out about these kind of issues and they have all said "no". If I were an imam I would have said "sister you are right we should speak out on these issues starting next friday, thanks for your concern bye".

What can be said with more certainty, however, is that many posters do support the Lioness’s demands of the mosque in an abstract way i.e. without considering how to achieve her aims in a constructive way. A subsection of these commenters express concern that she is

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111 Ahmed (2012) p.179
unnecessarily - perhaps unwittingly - antagonising those whose sensibility for the sacredness of the Friday prayer in space and time she offends:

**Dawnnxo 7 months ago**
I appreciate your efforts to raise awareness, I am Afghan myself, so I know what is going on in the Mid East/Central Asia, but all these videos you're making just make you sound like an angry and emotional little kid who wants to protest for the sake of protesting. Channel your passion into something constructive to help those in need instead of shouting at old Imams at your local mosque. Thanks

**mofasaful 10 months ago**
wow! you probably think you're doing a good thing, and there are SOME fair points you make in your videos, but all you're doing is attacking people that don't think like you do. do you honestly think that attitude is going to encourage people to join you? more likely you're turning people away more from your ideas…

Political activism as desecration

Seven comments alluded to the notion that the Friday prayer – and for some by extension, the mosque space in general – is an apolitical environment. If we define the maintenance of sacredness using the situational model, then the intrusion of explicitly political concerns in the Friday prayer desecrates the sacred space, as it violates the boundaries that the commentators believe preserve its sacredness from the profane world which surrounds it:

**AbuAbdullahUK 1 year ago**
The purpose of the khutbah is to admonish the muslims and to remind them of the hereafter. it is NOT to talk about politics, especially those issues, such as Palestine, that the general, average Muslim can do very, very little about, apart from making du'a, sending money and clothes…

**MissionMarvelous 1 year ago**
This woman disrespected the entire atmosphere. She brought politics into a Juma prayer. Juma prayer is a time to gain mercy and forgiveness from Allah, not a time to shout out political distress in the middle of a sermon….

**redutd4eva 1 year ago**
All praise is due to the one who saved me from what He tested her with and preferred me greatly over much of His creation.
Islam is about TAWHEED, worshiping ONE GOD, Allah. That's Islam.
"And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger, [saying], "Worship Allah and avoid Taghut [rebellion]."" [16:36]

One factor that may influence a poster’s unwillingness to conceive of a Jummah prayer/mosque space which advances political causes is the fear of dispossession, which Chidester and Linenthal describe as a form of desecration.\(^{112}\) The commenters below clearly

\(^{112}\) Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p.2
fear that the political climate and current securitisation prism through which the Muslim Community is viewed does not allow for politicized mosque spaces in the UK, and that to do so would result in the sacred space being “shut down”:

**thefivestarboss 1 year ago**

...What do you expect the imam to do call for all British Muslims to take the first flight to Palestine and go slaughter Israeli soldiers that would be classed as incitement to terrorism then the imam would be arrested and jailed, the mosque would be shut down and there would be no where to pray.

**TheInnocentOne 1 year ago**

is she dumb or sumfin she wants da mosque to get raided for terrorist speeches for crying out loud we live in a country dat's been behind all of dis since day one u cant do shit here good intention but a dumb ass way to do sumfin abt it

From this perspective, the Lioness’ actions could be seen as enabling a form of desecration – dispossession – to take place, even if she herself is not the purveyor of desecration. *Halima Begum and John Eade in a study* of Bangladeshi reactions to the War on Terror in Tower Hamlets, have discussed how Bangladeshi elders were weary of advocating dissent within the mosque or public spaces associated with their community as a result of a deep sense of vulnerability about “the risk that their claims to citizenship might be called into question”:

“…dissent sometimes reached fever pitch in individual households, but always remained mediated and managed in public spaces, such as the street or places of worship”\(^\text{113}\).

**Overcoming prior desecration**

Rather than identifying the Lioness as the source of defilement for bringing politics into an a-political sacred space, some commenters perceived the sacred space to already have been defiled prior to the Lioness’ encroachment by pernicious Government pressure and influence on mosques and/or incompetent imams:

**abz2000123 10 months ago**

...the imams are becoming more and more the servants and appeasers of the criminal governments, i hardly go jumu'ah now because of the fact that they agree to give sermons with points given by the government...

**abdullahdeen1 1 year ago**

it is well known knowledge that mosques are taking funds from the kufar [disbeliever] government to fund them, when allah forbade it in the qur'an. and the scholars say not for a kufar to even sweep the floor of the mosque. you search on google about the government prevent scheme, and there is a list of criteria this kufar government have listed what they will do with their funds they give, which is in the millions, search and google and see how many mosques fit their scheme...

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ghuraba44 1 year ago
She is right, she is correct. People may argue about the correctness of her actions from the fiqh point of view. But when jihad is fard ayn, and the khutba is devoid of its zikr, what kind of khutbah is that?

The controversial Government Prevent scheme is explicitly referred to by abdullahdeen1 as having a desecrating impact upon the mosque. Indeed Kundani alleges that officially sanctioned initiatives under the Prevent programme have enabled the surveillance of British Muslims114.

This securitisation framework also manifests itself in other ways on the YouTube discussion forum with some commenters identifying the Lioness as part of a sinister project headed by the Government, and/or Secret Service to influence the mosques. From these comments we may infer that these commentators perceive the mosques as embattled sacred spaces, and the Lioness as the latest difficulty they must overcome:

Kuahana03 8 months ago
From what's apparent is people shouldn't debate these guys their either mi5 agents or are seeking attention and friendship. Plenty of naseeha [advice] has been given to them.

abss117 1 year ago
HOW DARE U INTERRUPT AN IMAM AT JUMMAH... GO LEARN UR DEEN PROPERLY AND NOT FROM DEVIANTS SET UP BY THE GOVERNMENT SUCH AS MPAC

Reconstituting sacred space with the political

The Lioness writes that she is holding British Imams “to account until they change” having “failed to teach us to take up political Jihad to free our bleeding ummah”115. The political Jihad she refers to entails:

“Muslims in the UK must get involved in the political process in order to encourage a more ethical foreign policy. Terrorism can never be stopped until British and American governments stop invading and interfering in Muslim states. As Muslims, defending the oppressed is a fard upon us and we exercise this religious duty through political Jihad.116.”

By disrupting the Friday prayer, the Lioness seeks to demonstrate that the imam and mosque are derelict in their religious duty of “defending the oppressed” and therefore the

115 About section on YouTube video website page
116 Ibid.
congregation “owe them no obedience”\textsuperscript{117}. This study sees the Lioness’ actions as an endeavour to reconstitute the sacred space of the mosque by informing the ritual of the Friday prayer with a political inflection. This becomes possible if one recollects that “ritual is a defining feature of sacralisation”\textsuperscript{118}. As such during her intervention into the mosque, she brings attention to the need for the topic of the ritual khutba to relate to a matter of political consequence:

“when Palestinians…Palestinian children were having their brain cells blown out, what was the khutba about in Ramadan?”\textsuperscript{119}

There have been organisations championing similar reforms. The Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK) in the course of seeking to politicize Muslims and reform mosques have suggested a weekly ‘Current Events Bulletin’ “for example making a simple announcement on a Friday, before Prayers, about current affairs that affect Muslims around the world and in the UK.”\textsuperscript{120} Notably, while MPACUK reforms suggested that “a simple announcement on a Friday, \textit{before Prayers}, about current affairs that affect Muslims around the world and in the UK”\textsuperscript{121}, the Lioness arguably seeks to relocate the ‘political jihad’ to the very centre of Muslim worship.

As Wardak notes, there is a degree of social control that is exercised by the mosque during the Friday prayer:

“…the public expression of shared sentiments and the feelings of unity by the faithful during the \textit{Jom'a} prayer: it is a renewal of the worshippers' commitment to their shared sets of moral and religious values. It is the renewal of commitment to Allah, to obey him, and at the same time it is a commitment with each other that they will abide by the norms and values of their 'moral community’”\textsuperscript{122}

It is these very norms and values that the Lioness seeks to change and thereby to embed into the moral consciousness of the British Muslim community. To deliver those values as part of the ritual process of the Friday prayer is to sacralise the mosque space as symbolic of that purpose and by association, the religious community who attend the mosque with the obligation to apply such values (fighting against oppression through political jihad) in their daily lives.

Those few commenters who see the mosque as defiled by an apolitical malaise, understandably champion the cause of the Lioness:

\texttt{revolutie030}

\texttt{Respect for this sister, Wallahi she is right.}

"Indeed, what kind of piety is there in a person who witnesses Allah's sanctities being violated, his religion abandoned, the Sunnah of His Messenger shunned, and yet

\textsuperscript{117}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118}Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p.10
\textsuperscript{119}Video transcript
\textsuperscript{120}Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK http://www.mpacuk.org/content/view/3892/81/ [accessed 22nd November 2008]. Cited in Dyke (2009) p.19
\textsuperscript{121}Ibid. (emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{122}Wardak (2002) p. 217
remains still with a cold heart and a shut mouth? Such a person is like a dumb Shaytan!"
Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah
A'alâm al-Muwâqqî'in, volume 2, page 176).

**abdullahdeen1 1 year ago**
…we need to revive the deen of allah, masha allah ukhti [sister], may allah reward you for forbidding the evil with your tongue

**Anfal39**
...InshaaAllah the Muslims will follow in this sisters footsteps...
Wallahi [By God] she has done a great and beautiful thing...
May Allah protect and Accept Ameen...

Two commenters display a more nuanced critique of the Lioness’ actions. They argues not that politics desecrates, but rather that the Friday prayer does not have to be infused with the political for it to be authentically Islamic i.e. the sacred space is large enough to encompass both the political and the non-political together, or separately, depending on the Imam’s prerogative:

**F4RUQ01 1 year ago**
…I do agree that Imams should be speaking about more pressing matters but it is not haram [prohibited] for them to speak about non political issues.

**MKAS93**
I aint one to judge, but you should not have disturbed the khutbah. The khutbah does not always have to be upon one specific topic in Islam, which you spoke out about; Oppression. There are many topics and which ever topic the Imam would like to discuss it is his choice as long as the information being given out is correct…

**Discussion**

Beyond the notion that desecration occurred because of the interruption of a ritualised order and disregard for a ruling of silence in a sacred space, it is worth considering the factors behind the YouTube video receiving such a large number of comments, the majority of which express their disapproval using particularly hyperbolic and emotional language.

Garbriele Marranci in an ethnographic study Pakistanis in Northern Ireland notes that the mosque not only provided the community with Islamic facilities, but its organisation of their religious life “acquired a symbolic meaning”:

“…in one interview an Indian man emphasised that the regular Friday prayers had transformed their community from a group of immigrants into a real ummah (community of believers)”125.

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The mosque’s importance becomes manifest therefore as a site of socialisation providing “cohesion and continuity” for a religious community, achieved through the communal gathering of the Friday prayer. Wardak suggests that whilst the Friday prayer is on the surface a set of rituals and a sermon on Islamic morality, “a deeper look at this collective social practice suggests that it has more manifest social functions for the cohesion of the community” by providing an opportunity for the “translation of the internalised Islamic morality into practice”\(^{124}\). Referencing Durkheim, Wardak argues cogently that when the Jummah prayer is performed, the worshippers’ thoughts are focused upon:

“... their common beliefs, their common traditions, the memory of their ancestors, the collective idea of which they are an incarnation; in a word, upon social things ... the spark of social being which each bears within him necessarily participates in this collective renovation. The individual soul is regenerated, too, by being dipped again in the sources from which its life came; consequently, it feels itself stronger, more fully master of itself...”\(^{125}\)

In view of this interpretation, the Lioness’ actions desecrate the sacred space of the mosque, because of the interruption of a fundamental social process, which has until now been inconclusively defined as ‘ritual’, by which a religious community partakes in the “collective renovation” of their individualised selves and transform into a cohesive community.

An interrelated issue is the set of social circumstance faced by much of the British Muslim community, which have transformed some mosques into actual and symbolic ‘safe space’. Sean McLoughlin clarifies that in the West mosques have “come to be seen as ‘safe’ Islamic spaces, ‘havens’ in an environment that some Muslim migrants imagine to be bounded in opposition to their faith”. He adds that “Mosques can provide ‘secure’ religio-cultural continuity for those who have faced the dislocating experiences of migration, and the social exclusion of racism and unemployment (Kalra 2000).”\(^{126}\) The Lioness in seeking to disturb and challenge a ‘safe space’ arguably exacerbates the sense of defilement. Indeed MissionMarvelous articulates how the atmosphere of a quietist spiritual tradition in a mosque, identifiable as a “safe space” is the primary casualty of the Lioness’ actions when he/she argues:

“This woman disrespected the entire atmosphere. She brought politics into a Juma prayer. Juma prayer is a time to gain mercy and forgiveness from Allah, not a time to shout out political distress in the middle of a sermon. lol”

It is important not to overstate this particular causational link between the perception of desecration articulated by the commenter and the destruction of a symbolic and actual ‘safe space’. This is because the observation of the mosque as a ‘safe space’ is typically associated with an elder generation of first generation migrants\(^{127}\), whilst the statistical data shows the demographic age range for the majority of scholars being between the ages of 18 and 44.

\(^{124}\) Wardak (2002) p.216
\(^{126}\) McLoughlin (2005) p.1048
\(^{127}\) Ibid.
The actions of the Lioness are explicitly political, in that she challenges the authority of the mosque leadership (imams, mosque committee) right to choose the content of Friday prayers, and because that very challenge concerns the politicisation of that material. It has been demonstrated that the majority of commenters choose not to extensively engage with the latter issue, but identify potential defilement of the mosque space as emanating from the disruption of the ritualised order of the prayer, which they would have been arguably highlighted regardless of the content of the challenge.

The Lionesses emphasis on the centrality of politics during the khutba is arguably a reaction to the khutba having become “a ritualised recitation of standardised Arabic language sermons” which when in English “often focus on esoteric theological minutiae designed to cement the imam’s scholarly credentials, rather than addressing pressing issues of contemporary social relevance.”

In the process of reconstituting the political as a part of the sacred, the Lioness also reconstitutes the sacred space in another way, by inviting an interpretation of it as ‘a place of dialogue and dissent’. She thereby helps to prevent what Ahmed notes is the “reductivism in Islam” which sacralises the mosque space while “othering most of life except ritual prayers.”

Gender and sacred space

A recurrent theme among commenters was the issue of behavioural norms for women in the mosque. This section primarily concentrates on whether the actions of the Lioness, by virtue of her gender, were a cause of desecration during the Friday prayer? A multitude of perspectives were provided on the theme ranging from the more numerous critical reflections on the Lioness’s “shameful” intrusion into the male prayer space, to those posters who felt that the Lioness was a model Muslim women who showed unwavering concern for the plight of the oppressed, at a time when her male counterparts failed to.

Segregated space as an aspect of the sacred

The most predominant gendered critique of the Lioness’ actions referred to her violating the segregated prayer space of the mosque and then choosing to draw attention to herself in the male prayer area by vocally disrupting the prayer.

Tabi3atu0AhluBayt 1 year ago
…A sister should not walk in the men's side of a mosque like this and make a scene, it is plain attention seeking. And even if that is not her intention, it will seem like it….

A number of the commenters show that whilst they support her actions politically, they cannot justify her flagrant violation of segregated prayer spaces:

Striving4firdausi 10 months ago
That ukhti [sister] is crazy lol I have never seen such ukhti [sisters] calling brother for jihad. She is right regarding that Imams must preach jihad, and be dependent to Allah Taala Only. But the thing that she came in front of men is not right.

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**warda15 1 year ago**
because where is her haya(shyness) ? im not going to disagree and say she that she is not talking sense or that i dont agree with what shes saying but as a muslim women there are somethings that you can and cant do. And her walking into a room full of men to get her message across, is a no no. But allah knows best.

The condemnation of the Lioness’ intrusion into the men’s prayer space leads one commenter to argue that it would have been more acceptable for her to have made her grievances known from the women’s prayer space. This highlights the violation of segregated boundaries as the primary cause of desecration, over the more gender neutral concern of disrupting the prayer service. This of course overlooks the issue of who the Lioness would make her grievances known to, given that the Imam who she seeks to criticize is by virtue of his sex located in the men’s prayer space.

**maryamxo 1 year ago**
I agree with her, although the manner she presented her argument was unacceptable…. although she shouldn't not said it in front of the men only the women it would be fine

The prohibition on speech during the khutba, which applies to both sexes, has already been discussed. A number of commenters however referred to the fact that the Lioness particularly desecrates the sacredness of the prayer space by raising her voice as a woman, in front of men. The comments below reflect the putatively prophetic injunction that a woman’s voice is her awrah, which translates loosely as ‘nakedness’. That is to say, it is understood by some commenters that a woman’s voice is part of her nakedness and therefore it should not be heard in public spaces where she is among those who are not her mahram (unmarriageable kin):

**Salafi5977 10 months ago**
there are ways of addressing issues and she went against these points. please dont encourage this behaviour. for a woman to raise her voice, her awrah. to mix with men. speak during khutbah which is forbidden.

**ArchaicReality**
Mash'Allah. i would say ukthi [sister] that i applaud your strength but the voice of a woman should be humble and lowered…. 

Some commenters also make mention of the fact that her attire does not conform to Islamic requirements of modest dress, which would further defile the place of worship. Notably, however the video does not identify the Lioness’ clothing so these comments are likely to be inferences based on other videos:

**Terminator261 1 month ago**
…wallahi [by God] she has disgusted me?? raising your voice infront of men? being infront of men? i doubt she was even covered like our beloved mother A’ishaa?? is this what it has come to?? we call the people to kheyr [good] and we dont we it ourselves??...

**mataher2011** 1 year ago  
Sister you need to practice what you preach (tight clothing)

It is important to note that much of the abuse directed at the Lioness, is particularly sexist and gendered. It is the lioness’ violation of the segregated boundaries of the mosque that arguably results in her being ascribed terms which indicate sexual immoral behaviour including “whore”, “slag” and “bitch” several times:

**zzzaaa09900** 1 year ago  
you fucking slag. who the fuck is this whore coming into the masjid looking for attention?...

**MrMaany123** 6 months ago  
Dumb Bitch! Stupid lost cause, pathetic waste of a space, the whores just looking for attention, walking into a mosque and screaming her head off, she has no clue about islam, and is a extremist whore.!!

There are however two commenters who question the continual analysis of the Lioness’ actions according to her gender as opposed to her political convictions. Notably both commenters also note that there must be *adab* [good manners] in an individual’s conduct in a sacred place, which they believe is lacking on the part of the Lioness.

**aliyu123** 1 year ago  
…Screaming in the masjid is a disgrace and not because you're a women( a fact a lot of posters seem to be fixated on) but because it is lacking in Akhlaq and Adab!

**Blissftw** 1 year ago  
In fairness, lets forget that the person in this video was a woman just for a minute. Once we have done this, is it not the right of a Muslim to question their masjids? in terms of their actions and projects that will truly benefit the community? …    
Having said that she needs to maintain her adaab. May Allah guide us all.

With regard to segregated space and the maintenance of restrictions of contact between the sexes in the mosque, commenters also critique the actions of the men who choose to remove the Lioness from the mosque, arguing that they themselves were guilty of violating behavioural norms relating to contact between the sexes:
Gendered roles in the public sphere

Some commenters use the Lioness’ intervention to explicate on the roles of women and men in the public sphere. They argue that the Lioness’ actions violate both the rules that govern the segregation of men and women in sacred spaces, but also the God ordained distinctions for men and women concerning the occupations and spheres of life they may engage in. The following comments identify the engagement of women in politics, which would involve the instruction of men as impermissible in Islam. As such for these commenters, the Lioness defiles the sacred space of the mosque regardless of the manner by which she chooses to communicate her political Jihad, because any initiative she takes involving leadership in the public sphere is Islamically proscribed by virtue of her gender:

Dearest young sister, is this the way the mothers of the faithful would have handled the situation?... There is much that may disappoint us in this deen [religion] today in the West, but we must handle it properly. We must remember our roles, women are not the leaders of men. They could not listen to what you had to say. They were shocked and thought you were crazy….

Women should not worry about politics because Muhammad SAW said: "those who entrust their affairs to a woman shall never know prosperity" [Bukhari and Musnad of Imaam of Ahmad]

Men have been naturally designed hot-headed, and so woman have been made soft to counteract this...

As for the sister in this video, what she did in this video is completely impermissible, for obvious reasons..It cannot be justified with "good intention" as this is Shaytaan's trickery..

There are however, a group of commenters who reject these interpretations of gendered roles which exclude women from having a political role within society. They articulate these opinions either i) using Islamic textual sources to show that the interpretations cited by adverserial commenters are incorrect, or ii) on the basis that the current political climate in which Muslims find themselves and in which men are currently failing in their archetypal gendered roles, demands a more active female leadership in the public and political spheres:

wallahi if there are no men speaking the truth then our women should not keep quiet when keeping quiet will cause more harm

…it is a shame that all the brothers sat down and listen to this munkar [evil] and a sister had to step up to the plate, we claim to be the ummah of rasoolullah? you should
be ashamed of yourself men, so called men, we should rise. we are commanded to support the jihad with our lives tongues and wealth, not slander those who do

Discussion

The number of comments which focus on a gender based appraisals of the actions of the Lioness should make us aware of the degree of scrutiny which women face when acting unconventionally in public spaces. Rahielah Ali and Peter Hopkins note that

“Muslim women, when stepping outside of the boundaries of the home, enter the public sphere and are often subject to scrutiny by the local community, their friends and family and the non-Muslim community.”

Women carry “expectations about appropriate gendered and religious modes of dress, practice and social modesty” because it is they who often carry the burden of maintaining the honour of the family and wider community. As such it has been shown that commenters make explicit derogatory references to the intentions, clothing, and even the Lioness’ choice to use her voice in public.

Indeed a number of the commenters explicitly allude to the fact that the Lioness should not allow herself to be portrayed online in the manner that she is because of the shame that it would bring to those associated with her:

Tabi3atu0Ahlulbayt

…A sister should not walk in the men's side of a mosque like this and make a scene, it is plain attention seeking. And even if that is not her intention, it will seem like it. Also, it is very unwise to post a video like this on Youtube, because it simply gives off the wrong impression about you, other Muslim women and possibly Islam as a whole - specially to those non Muslims who build assumptions based on videos like this! May Allah guide us all. Ameen.

The degree to which the Lioness’ actions in the mosque are identified as desecrating sacred space, will therefore be greater than a corresponding male religious activist by simple virtue of the fact that the Lioness is a women, and therefore her actions are likely to be more consistently scrutinised. Moreover, as has been identified in the course of the data analysis, there are proscriptions on female behaviour in the mosque, many of which are not equally applicable to male worshipers, such as the need to lower ones voice when in the company of men. This again, ensures that the Lioness has far more opportunities to desecrate the sacred space then if she was a man.

130 Ibid.
Traditionally, the mosque has been considered a ‘men’s arena’ and the gendered allocation of space largely related to “perceptions of women as objects of male sexual desire”. Although in Islamic law, “there is no scholarly consensus on either excluding women from the mosque entirely, or on segregating men and women”, it is clear that the majority of commenters used language indicating that the sacred space of the mosque was de-facto masculine in orientation; Ahmed defines this as the ‘masculinisation of mosques’. Notably, one commentator alluded to the fact that it is situations like these exemplified by the actions of the Lioness that the Prophet preferred women to pray at home. Thus indicating that women essentially threaten the sacredness of a male dominated sacred space, unless judiciously controlled:

This was also particularly apparent when one considered how textual evidences were continually sought to justify women’s participation in political affairs, especially the justification that the Lioness was permitted to act as she did – without impinging on the sense of sacred space - only because her male counterparts had failed to do so.

Prior to the analysis of this theme, it had been demonstrated that the Lioness was for most commenters guilty of violating sacred space for having disrupted the prayer and neglected an emphatic Prophet injunction to remain silent during the prayer. What becomes clear from this analysis is not that if she had been male that those same individuals would not have classified her acts as a defilement of sacred space, but that the defilement would certainly have occurred to a lesser extent because of the lesser degree of scrutiny and behavioural proscriptions applicable to a man in a ‘masculinised’ mosque environment.

One may also argue that the “Lioness’ is inherently dispossessed of sacred space by virtue of the fact that as a Muslim woman, she has no sanctioned access to the heart of the ritual centre of the Mosque - the Men’s prayer space – in which the Imam conducts the many ritual aspects of worship which constitute the Friday Jummah prayer. Line Nyhagen Predelli argues with relation to women’s participation in Norwegian mosques:

“An emphasis on the equal value of women and men may open up patriarchal concessions to women by providing them with new spaces for active citizenship. An acceptance of different rights for women and men will, however, function to constrain women’s citizenship and to maintain patriarchal gender regimes.”

Conclusion

133 Ibid. p.249
134 Woodlock (2010) p.54
135 Ahmed (2012) p.185
136 MrMasomenos 7 months ago
This is why Rasulullah (saws) preferred the women to pray in their homes.....subhanallah.
137 Predelli (2008) p.256
Chidester and Linenthal observation that “[Although] “the sacred” might be regarded as an empty signifier… its emptiness is filled with meaningful content as a result of specific strategies of symbolic engagement”\textsuperscript{138} has shown to be undoubtedly accurate. Beyond demonstrating the ways in which the Lioness may be considered to have desecrated the sacred space of the mosque (obstructing ritual, disobeying religious injunctions on silence, challenging segregation), the study uncovered how the Lioness herself pursues a specific strategy ‘of symbolic engagement’ to reorient the sacred space to make it more political. Whilst guilty of desecration according to a number of commenters, her supporters ironically identified her as a bastion working against defilement, which they believed to have already occurred to the sacred space through its lack of ritual engagement in the political Jihad. In the process of reconstituting the political as a part of the sacred, the Lioness also reconstitutes the sacred space in another way, by inviting an interpretation of it as ‘a place of dialogue and dissent’.

Word count: 16,492

\textsuperscript{138} Chidester and Linenthal (1995) p. 19
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