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Devotional Labor and the Making of Islamic Selfhood: An Ethnography of Meryem

Introduction:

This paper begins with an unexpected friendship, one that which blossomed between myself and Meryem, a Muslim woman who I met while studying in Morocco. Every winter, students at Middlebury College are given the opportunity to take a single intensive course during the month of January. As a senior double-majoring in religion and computer science, desperately in need of major-specific graduation credits, the choices I had for my final "J-term" course were limited, but one stood out: "Islam in Contemporary Morocco." Led by my advisor and friend Professor Ata Anzali, the course culminated in 11 days of travel throughout Morocco, spent learning about the ways that history, politics, and memory are woven into the fabric of Moroccan Islam. I had never gotten the chance to study abroad - and the expenses of this travel were covered by the college - so I applied, got accepted, and enrolled without clear expectations of what would come.

Meryem was one of our local guides during the trip. She traveled with us around the country, translating, contextualizing, and mediating the encounters we had along the way. Flipping through the photo album from the trip to remember stories for this paper, I find Meryem smiling in every image where she appears - sometimes softly, sometimes full of laughter. In one, she stands in the middle of the desert at sunset; in another, she stretches her arms wide in front of

the towering Minaret of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. The settings may vary greatly, but her smile remains. She's in her late twenties, and she dresses in a way that's both modest and expressive. She wears the hijab every day, and it's clear she puts thought into how she styles it. On one day, she wears a floral scarf tucked neatly into a purple turtleneck, all contained by a cream-colored overcoat. On another, she dons a gray veil patterned with colorful stars, flowing a bit more loosely over her shoulders, and framed by a soft grey shawl atop a checkered tunic. There is a sense of grounding which comes from the attention to detail in her outfits. Every detail is related, balanced by the colors and patterns around it. There is a quiet intentionality to her fashion which suggests she may move through the world with care and self-awareness.

Born into a Muslim family in Casablanca, Meryem was raised in a home where Islam was part of everyday life. At around 10 to 12 years old, she began to practice more consistently, performing *salah* – the 5 daily prayers of Islam – at her parents instruction. But, during high school she experienced what she describes as the first major transformation in her religious identity. She can't remember the exact conversation that sparked it, only that it was with a close friend, and he said something that sparked a shift. It was after this conversation that Meryem became hungry for religious knowledge. When a high school Islamic studies teacher recommended a book entitled *The Story of Faith Between Philosophy, Science, and the Quran,* she scoured her hometown to find a copy. After telling that teacher about her shortcoming, he brought her a PDF version to read. Being the voracious reader that she is, Meryem dove in, describing the book as "the first rational connection [made] with my rituals and worship."

That moment led Meryem to a bold decision - she wanted to apply to apply to Dar El-Hadith Al-Hassaniya, Morocco's most prestigious institution of Islamic Studies. Though she

missed the undergraduate application deadline, enrolling at a local university instead to study Psychology, Dar El-Hadith became her "destiny". In her third year at university, she began quietly preparing for Dar-El Hadith's challenging selection process. She didn't tell anyone in her family, worried they would try and dissuade her from leaving Casablanca. She studied in secret, applied in secret, and was invited to a pre-selection exam. Only then did she tell her astonished family she would be traveling to Rabat. "It only took six minutes," she told me of the oral exam, during which five professors asked her to respond to selection questions. She left unsure - she had missed two questions. But, when the results came out a week later, Meryem learned she had scored 5th out of the year's 36 accepted students, all out of a pool of around 250 initial applicants. She spent 3 years there, which she describes as some of the most special in her life.

Looking back at our WhatsApp messages, it's funny to see how our friendship evolved. Our earliest exchanges from the trip involve misspelled names and practical details: "Is Giffi with you?" - mistakenly writing my name as "Giffi" instead of "Jiffy" - and "For laundry, you will find all the information in your closet." But, as time goes by, the questions and remarks made between us – in-person and online – become deeper. What began as everyday logistics blossomed into conversations about faith, identity, and the role of the divine in our lives. One moment in particular stood out: a late-night conversation in Chefchaouen. Known widely as the "blue-city" - originating from a Jewish tradition of painting the walls and buildings blue – our group visited the city to a *hadra* performance led by an all-women's group. Directly translating to "presence", a *hadra* is a Sufi devotional gathering in which attendees perform dhikr – the remembrance of Allah - through prayer and Quranic recitation, which often came in rhythmic form. For Meryem, this notion of remembrance is central to understanding Islam as not simply as

a set of rules or rituals, but as something that suffuses one's life with purpose, meaning, and direction. That moment planted the seed for this project.

I found myself thinking of Meryem again in the weeks following my return from Morocco. Our conversations had stayed with me, not only for what they revealed about her spiritual and religious world, but for how naturally they invited reflection. Meryem became close with many of us, sharing inside jokes - passing around funny photos in group chats, joining in on the general camaraderie – but something felt distinct about our friendship. We often drifted into conversations about personal belief and spirituality, and while those moments felt intimate, there was never any concern from us or others that our friendship was inappropriate. When I reached out to reconnect, her warmth was immediate and familiar. "It's always a good thing to reflect and to share thoughts with someone we trust," she wrote, "And I trust you," she wrote in response to my message asking if she'd be open to being interviewed for this paper, an ethnographic research project for my "Women, Religion and Ethnography" class.

Since then, our exchanges have continued across borders and time zones, deepening what began as a single conversation into an ongoing dialogue about faith, meaning, and the quiet presence of the divine in everyday life. It is from her insights that Meryem reveals how religion is not limited to the practice of formal rituals or alignment with static beliefs. Instead, it is cultivated through continued acts of care, discipline, and reflection. This paper traces how these acts manifest in Meryem's life, and the meanings they produce, through a lens I have come to understand as *devotional labor*: the active and embodied efforts through which religion is enacted, styled, and sustained in the everyday. I draw inspiration from Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada's articulation of the term in *Lifeblood of the Parish,* where she writes that devotional

labor "put[s] people in relationship with the divine" and "embeds them in broader social networks of support and trust" (Maldonado-Estrada, 80). While her ethnography focuses on Catholic laymen in Brooklyn, she draws from Elaine Peña's earlier study of Guadalupan devotees, whose devotional labor encompasses "all the things [they] do" as they engage with the divine and each other to "create and maintain sacred space" (Maldonado-Estrada, 80; Peña 2011). Together, these works offer a framework for understanding the spiritual significance of embodied, everyday religious practice, something I argue is woven throughout Meryem's rituals, materiality, and the stories she tells.

Section 1: The Generative Power of Ritual and Meryem's Religious Becoming

The evolution of Meryem's relationship to Islamic ritual offers a window into how religious practice can function not merely as an obligation, but a form of spiritual 'reorientation.' In our conversations, she repeatedly reflected on how her understanding of ritual had shifted from a framework focusing on earning divine favor to one rooted in spiritual surrender and trust. This section draws from these reflections to explore how Meryem's practices illuminate ritual's power to cultivate ethical selves and transform embodied experiences into a source of spiritual clarity and moral purpose, as suggested by scholars such as Catherine Bell and Saba Mahmood. Rather than seeing ritual repetition and commitment as a purely physical practice, Meryem's experience suggests that it is precisely through repetition that one can constitute a new sense of self and place: the shaping of embodied habits and devotion to ritual acts can catalyze spiritual change. In the story Meryem tells about her changing relationship to Islam and her religious

practice, she comes to understand rituals as working beyond her physicality, as deliberate and self-sacrificial acts which enhance her relationship to Allah.

During one of our longer conversations, I asked Meryem what her rituals mean to her. Her response surprised me with its clarity, a sure sign of the thought she has put into this facet of her life: "I used to think that praying, fasting, and doing charities were what were required to do to get guidance and good luck from Allah." Earlier in her life, Meryem approached ritual as a kind of spiritual transaction. They were actions performed in hopes of receiving something in return, like divine guidance and support. But, that understanding began to shift during a particularly difficult time of her life in 2024. Without divulging too many details, Meryem shared that this period was marked by personal hardship and emotional turbulence. During that time, she found herself in search of a way to "stay mentally safe and secure." And, it was from this point of turbulence that she found respite in a return to ritual. As Meryem writes, "I started analyzing the challenges that I was facing...[1] and I realized that maybe what Allah was planning for me was much bigger than what I expected from life... [I started] trusting and surrendering to Allah." What Meryem once saw as an obligatory/transactional practice – a task to be done in exchange for divine favor – transformed into a source of humble reorientation towards Allah. Through the "surrender" that Meryem describes, her experience of ritual began to change. The most striking shift, as she describes, came through her supplications – also known as

[1] In this paper, ellipses ("...") are used to indicate either omitted words in quotations or moments in which Meryem stumbled, paused, or corrected herself in speech. English is her second language – she natively speaks Darija, a Arabic dialect spoken in Morocco - so these inclusions aim to provide clarity while respecting the integrity of her story.

du'ā'. Unlike the 5 daily prayers – the *Salah* - *du'ā'* are prayers which can be made at any time or place throughout the day. However, such flexibility does not inhibit their intercessory power for Meryem: "[Doing supplications] was life changing for me. Instead of thinking about negative ideas and thoughts I was doing supplications to Allah, and I started feeling the help, the guidance from him, and especially the serenity and reassurance through faith in Allah that I've been looking for." Through supplications, prayer becomes for Meryem much more than a request for divine intervention. Instead, it is an opportunity to integrate remembrance of Allah into her daily life. The flexibility of the *du'ā'* is its power, as it reminds Meryem that her spiritual bond is not limited to a particular time or place, but simply requires her presence. For Meryem, the repetition of these prayers allows for moments of quiet intercession – a direct like between herself and the Divine – through which she can make the presence of the Divine real, felt, and known in her life.

While supplication offered Meryem moments of spontaneous connection with the Divine,it was in the structured rituals of Ramadan that the transformation of her spiritual discipline shows its immense depth. Ramadan – the Holiest of months in the Islamic calendar – involves a constellation of structured, ritual obligations. When I asked Meryem about this practices - whether it be fasting from dawn to dusk, attending lectures at the Mosque, or hours-long prayers into the night – she described it to me as "proof that we can let go of worldly desires." For her, these desires include not only material comforts like food and water, but deeper attachments to control, immediacy, and oneself. But, such a rigid structure does not constrain her, but deepens her appreciation for spiritual life. It becomes a way of surrendering to a will beyond her own, that of Allah. And, it is through this surrender that Meryem shows how rituals may open ones' moral horizons: the ritual act does not end at the body, but may extend outward,

shaping how one acts in and sees the world, and the purpose of their life beyond the physical. As she puts it, “What helps us stay committed to our rituals is to strengthen our connection with Allah and also to go to Jannah (Paradise) in the afterlife... being in paradise is wonderful, but it wouldn’t mean much if we couldn’t see Allah. That’s what motivates us to do good deeds, be kind, and treat everyone with respect.” In this reflection, Meryem reveals how ritual can shape not just belief, but spiritual and moral orientation. Her repeated acts of devotion not only involve her body, but reorient her towards humility, love for the Divine, and interpersonal responsibility.

Meryem’s motivation to fast or to pray is not rooted in an abstract notion of obedience, but in the hope that she may, as she puts it, “get closer to God” in worldly life and what may follow it. The longing to “see Allah” becomes a fundamental motivation which informs her everyday responsibilities, that of doing good deeds, and being kind towards others. Rather than viewing her rituals as an enactment of already existing values, Meryem’s story shows how ritual practice can generate the very worldview it seeks to maintain. Ramadan, in this way, should not be seen as a month of external requirements, but a site of spiritual transformation and cultivation, where one may grow to understand and consolidate their sense of interior selfhood through embodied repetitions.

The evolution of Meryem’s relationship to ritual – from transactional to transformative resonates closely with Catherine Bell’s claim that the power of ritual lies not in what is symbolically expressed – what is ritually done – but in the constitutive work that ritual does. In Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, Bell argues that ritualization – which she defines (abstractly) as the process by which certain actions are differentiated from ordinary behavior in order to produce particular effects in the world - is a “strategic way of acting in the world a way of

orchestrating the [ritual] actor to the environment, of drawing schemes and structures into the body, of grounding them in the soil of an embodied agent" (Bell 220). Such a framing helps to illuminate Meryem's shift from viewing ritual as a transactional duty to understanding them as activating and transformative ways of connecting with Allah. Here repetition of rituals like prayer and fasting did not just reflect a belief she already held but helped her cultivate and consolidate a new sense of trust and surrender to her spiritual life over time. As Bell puts it, "ritualization produces ritualized agents," embedding meaning into the body and reshaping how one inhabits reality (Bell 220). Meryem's commitment and changing relationship to ritual through her experience of hardship demonstrates this generative power: her understanding of divine guidance and moral obligation was not fully formed at the outset, but emerged in and through the act of ritual performance.

Where Bell highlights how ritual produces meaning through embodied action, Saba Mahmood deepens this view by demonstrating how repeated practices not only produce meaning, but shape who a person becomes. In her 2001 ethnographic essay, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent," Mahmood discusses how repeated ritual practices can cultivate ethical and spiritual selfhood through the lens of a women's mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt. In her account, Mahmood reveals how the form of piety she encountered "entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason... until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits" (Mahmood 212). Per Mahmood's account, ethical and spiritual selfhood is not innate. Instead, it is learned and shaped through sustained practices. This offers insightful language to clarify the transition Meryem experienced in her own life: her reflections don't just express a change in beliefs, but a change in

who she sees herself to be. As Meryem explained, she did not initially believe she could fully surrender to Allah's plan for her, but her commitment to ritual acts gradually reshaped that belief into an embodied trust. This supports Mahmood's broader claim that "action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them" (Mahmood 214). Meryem's experience with ritual affirms that ritual does not just reflect who she already is, but gives form to new elements of her identity. Through her engagements with ritual life, she has transformed into a new moral and spiritual being, oriented toward Allah and continually seeking ways to bring herself closer to him.

Meryem's story offers a powerful confirmation of what Catherine Bell and Saba Mahmood argue: ritual is not just expressive, but generative, capable of shaping ones' spiritual orientation, emotional state, and their very sense of selfhood. Her journey reveals that spiritual understanding is not always immediate, but cultivated through the physical and emotional labor of repeated devotional acts. Whether through the informal rhythms of *du'ā'* or the structured disciplines of Ramadan, Meryem consistently describes how her ritual life has enhanced her relationship to Allah, and deepened her moral relationship to the world around her. In this way, Meryem's experience suggests a larger claim that in lived religious life, it is not necessarily pre-existing, concrete meanings which animate action, but action which may gradually and powerfully reveal those meanings.

Section 2: Devoting the Day - Materiality and Meryem's Everyday Life

While Meryem's ritual practices are critical for understanding her identity as a Muslim woman, he quotidian rhythms of her every day life offer a glimpse into how Islam is lived,

embodied, and expressed beyond formal rituals, as a Muslim woman in the contemporary age. Drawing from two specific everyday actions she described to me – her styling of her hijab, and use of a digital prayer bead device – Meryem's stories reveal how faith is woven into the fabric of 'ordinary' experience. From her stories and reflections, I came to see many of Meryem's daily practices as deliberate acts of care, self-expression, and devotion which allow her to fashion herself as a Muslim woman. In these accounts, Meryem's narrative points us to the power of materiality, that is the ways in which being Muslim may be carried through and shaped by one's interactions with the material world. By engaging with the ways Meryem's faith manifests in daily life, we can see how spiritual meaning is crafted through materiality, forming for her a dynamic and deeply felt relationship with the divine that is not limited to the more formal practices analyzed above.

In our conversations, Meryem often describes how her relationship with Allah unfolds through small, personal acts of devotion. While they could be overlooked as acts of habit, these moments carry deep intentionality. Meryem wears a hijab every day, but it's never the same pattern. When I ask Meryem about how she chooses what to wear, she explains "I always choose the convenient scarf for my outfit. We call it "color harmony"... I feel like I'm wearing my hijab and taking care of myself at the same time, by doing what will positively please me." Meryem's attention to how color, beauty, and presentation fit together is not about appearance for its own sake, but about cultivating a sense of inner balance through her external presentation. Her commitment to "color harmony" reflects a kind of spiritual disciple in which spiritual care and self-expression are intertwined, each mediated through the material presence of her *hijab.*

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This sense of balance, though expressed aesthetically, is also tied to Meryem's deep religious commitments. Reflecting on when she began to wear her hijab, Meryem told me "I started wearing a Hijab when I was 16 yo [sic], and it was a personal choice, no one forced me to… I experienced a mindset shift." From this shift emerged a more grounded understanding of the hijab not just as an external symbol, but as a form of embodied piety. "For me," she says, "it's a religious duty that has to be respected and acted on… I wear it out of love for Allah, not fear from Him… to stay close, and to seek His guidance and love from Him. It's a spiritual perspective and a spiritual way of thinking, not only rules to follow." In her words, the hijab becomes a devotional act, a fabric that not only drapes around her but which holds together her intentions, discipline, and love for Allah. It is both a moral commitment – something Meryem chooses to wear – and a spiritual vessel – a sensorial and material practice which helps her stay close to God.

In another conversation, Meryem tells me about her prayer beads – or *tasbih* – which have long been used by Muslims to keep count of recitations and remembrances of Allah. Typically made of beads strung together with a cord, passed one-by-one through a devotee's fingers, Meryem tells me about a digital version that she has adopted to keep track of supplications when she's not at home, "I use the traditional [prayer beads] at home but outside I use the digital one. It was life-changing for me. Instead of thinking about negative ideas and thoughts, I was doing supplications to Allah, and I started feeling the help, the guidance from Him." This technology allows Meryem to bring herself close to her faith, carrying supplications and remembrance with her throughout the day and bridging the sacred with the ordinary world. It is through the construction of this bridge that Meryem describes a tangible change in her

relationship with the Divine. She not only could shift her mind away from negativity, but *feel* the guidance and help of Allah, a feeling which she shares she still does not have the words to describe. In her use of the digital counter, Meryem does not abandon the spiritual function of prayer beads but instead adapts it to the realities of contemporary life. The *tasbih* – whether physical or digital – becomes a sacred medium, a material object which again re-orients Meryem's focus towards the divine.

Meryem's material practices resonate with arguments made by Esiaku Nwokocha in her study of religious dress in Haitian Vodou: "When dress becomes a part of religion, it is transformed into a sacred item, connoting beliefs, engaging with power dynamics, acting as a conduit to the spiritual world, and more" (Nwokocha 4). For Meryem, the scarf is not just a piece of clothing, but a devotional medium. Similarly, her use of the *tasbih* – particularly in digital form - shows how material objects can become vessels of sacred attention, adapting to a modern, technological age without losing spiritual potency. Sally Promey's framework of materiality in *Sensational Religion* helps to clarify this further: "Objects, images, and a proliferation of material substances engage, shape, and interact with human bodies, events, and ideas just as profoundly...as the words with which scholars generally exercise more comfortable interpretive familiarities" (Promey 4). As Meryem's story shows, the material world is not peripheral to her religious world – it is central. Her material choices allow her to express, sustain, and deepen her religious values. The materials of Meryem's devotion – whether it be cloth, beads, or digital screens – give physical form to her spiritual intentions. In this way, Meryem's experience of Islam is inseparable from the material forms through which she performs it. When Meryem discusses her Hijab, she identifies it as something symbolically distinct from the rest of her

outfit, but never separate. The scarf she selects not only completes her external 'look', but also helps "maintain" the balance of her internal state. In this way, Meryem's relationship to her Hijab is not just a matter of fashion, but an expression of piety, self-respect, and an active physical choice which shapes her interior world. In other words, her Hijab becomes a mode of spiritual self-styling.

Recent scholarship emphasizes how contemporary Hijab practices blend devotion and creative expression. As Citra Puspitasari and Jasni Dolah explain in "The Analysis of Integration between Hijab Concept and Fashion in Indonesia", the hijab has evolved in contemporary times into "a manifestation of religious ideology, a symbol of community, and affiliation as attributes that describes social status," while also serving as "a form of communication that conveys the messages of social and [cultural relevance]" (Puspitasari & Dolah 326). Seen through this lens, Meryem's attention to color harmony in her hijab styling is not only aesthetic but reflects an effort to express care for her material life in a way that aligns with her spiritual balance. Subsequently, we are encouraged to view Meryem's daily choices – whether in arranging her Hijab or counting digital prayers – are material enactments of Islam. They reveal how Meryem's faith lives dynamically through her corporeal reality, allowing a universal religious commitment to find its roots in the soil of everyday experience.

It is through her ordinary, everyday acts – the careful coordination of her Hijab, and the steady use of her digital prayer beads – that Meryem renders the Divine present in her daily world beyond formal ritual practices. Her devotional creativity affirms that religious life is not confined to explicitly sacred spaces – like a mosque, for example – but is lived through material gestures and routines. In this light, her daily practices – her styling of her hijab and use of the

digital *tasbih* - are not minor or peripheral, but spiritually generative. While the previous section examined how ritual acts can reshape interior life, Meryem's story here shows how inner devotion can radiate outward, taking shape through the choices she makes in the everyday. Together, these expressions of faith remind us that religion is not static or separate from one's materiality, but constantly made and remade through the way one chooses to interact with the physical world.

Section 3: Narrative – How Stories Give Form to Meryem's Sense of Religious Self

Over the course of our conversations, Meryem would often remark on how important it felt for her to put the story of her spiritual journey into words. What began as a conversation between two people became, for her, an opportunity to narrate her past, revisit her moments of transformation, and articulate her faith through language. Even more, it helped her understand her own spiritual journey more deeply. This section explores the constitutive power of narrative which has emerged through conversations with Meryem. By having an avenue to tell her story of transformation, she doesn't just recount past experiences, but engages in a process of narrative construction which allows her to make sense of her past. Meryem's reflections show that narration is not only a way of conveying belief, but a process that can help shape it. Through telling her story, Meryem both reflects on her growth, and ultimately brings a coherence to her evolving relationship with Allah.

Meryem has been clear that this process – of being asked to reflect and express her spiritual journey – has been an illuminating one. I asked Meryem what it meant to share her story, or really what the experience of putting her story into words has been like. Her response

was immediate: “yeah… I have to do it… and maybe you’re going to help push me to start writing about it. I actually started doing it with you,” she said to me, explaining how our conversations prompted her to begin articulating experiences that had previously remained unspoken. “When you asked me your questions, I kept reflecting on them… If you asked me this question before 2024, I would have no answers… Or the answers would be just a general idea. But now, it is more detailed. It has feelings between the words.” What emerged in her reflections was a story of inner transformation, of understanding not only what evolved in her religious life, but also why those changes happened.

Thinking back on her struggles in 2024, Meryem realizes now that what she needed to do was re-orient her trust away from her hands alone, and into the will of Allah: “What I need to do is trust that everything happens to me for a reason,” she told me. “But I needed to trust this, this belief, to live with this belief. I kept struggling to live with this idea.” Through continued reflection, Meryem expresses that she has come to see her past struggles as not an obstacle, but a catalyst of deepened faith – as an opening towards a more authentic connection with the Divine: “I realized that I love it, really, that what’s happened to me had to happen in order to feel the peace, the love, to develop my spiritual life, to keep this connection between me and God.” And, even more, she has come to appreciate the way her story may help others on a similar journey. She tells me that she wants to share what she has learned with others, especially those who may also be experiencing interior struggles, saying “I really want to share what I experienced with others,” she said, “especially those who might need it.” For Meryem, storytelling is not a retrospective act, but a way of understanding, of consolidating her own sense of religious and personal meaning, and of sharing the love of Allah which she has come to witness.

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Meryem's own awareness of storytelling's power resonates with Elaine Lawless' ethnographic study of Pentecostal women preachers in *Handmaidens of the Lord.* As Lawless writes, "the life story's singular achievement is that it affirms identity of the storyteller in the act of telling. The life story tells who one thinks one is and how one thinks one came to be that way" (Lawless 62). Like Meryem so clearly put forth, the act of telling one's story isn't descriptive, but rather an affirmation of one's sense of being. In Meryem's case, it is an affirmation of who she once was, and who she has become through her growing relationship with God. Lawless suggests that we consider life stories as "consciously constructed 'fictions'," not because they are misrepresentations of the truth, but because they reflect an effort to create a story which, though molded into a cohesive thread, remains rooted in the truth of one's personal history. In doing so, these stories allow a person to reconstruct their past in ways that "reinforce and validate" the person they have come to be today (Lawless 64-66).

This approach also finds resonance in Wade Clark Roof's "Religion and Narrative." Roof argues, like Lawless, that "narrative is motivated by a search for meaning; when people tell stories, essentially they bring order and direction to their lives." In Meryem's case, this is evident in how the act of narrating has helped her make sense of a difficult past. Instead of remaining a moment of despair in her past, the act of narrating it has helped her reframe this moment as a spiritual turning point, one which she has come to admire for the inner peace, spiritual depth, and love for Allah which it brought. Roof furthers this when he writes that "we tell stories not so much to illustrate as to affirm who we are and what gives identity, purpose, and meaning to our existence." This directly echoes the clarity and purpose Meryem expressed through our conversations. Telling her story to me is not a passive act or mindless choice, but a necessity – "I

have to do it" – which has helped Meryem discover the meanings within her own history. By tracing her mindset shift, the challenges she endured, and the way she now feels closer to Allah, Meryem's storytelling becomes a religious act itself. It not only reflects her devotion, but actively shapes and make sense of it. Through narrative, she clearly defines the path of her religious becoming, asserting that the Muslim she is today comes from not just the beliefs she holds, but the journey which God guided her on to cultivate and embody them.

Through the act of narration, Meryem has developed both the confidence to share her story with others and the language to understand that story within herself. In doing so, she demonstrates that storytelling is not a passive recounting of events, but a vital spiritual practice that allows her to make sense of experiences that were once characterized by uncertainty and pain. The story she tells is not a static or illustrative act, but a living force which evolves alongside her own faith. And, in telling it, she sanctifies the spiritual journey she has taken as a gift from Allah. In this way, her narrative is not just a way to tell what has happened in her life, but why it has happened, and how it continues to shape her relationship with the Divine. Like the ritual and material practices explored in the previous sections, narration becomes another active and embodied effort through which Meryem makes her faith tangible – felt, embodied, and meaningful in the everyday. Where ritual reshapes spirituality through disciplined action, and material practices render the Divine present in daily life, narrative functions as the avenue through which Meryem clarifies and expresses her spiritual becoming, both for herself and for others. Taken together, these dimensions of Meryem's religious life affirm that religion is not just about a static set of beliefs, but is continuously cultivated through the way one acts, what one wears, and the stories one is moved to tell.

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Conclusion:

Across all our conversations, what has become most clear is that Meryem's religious life is neither static nor automatic. Instead, it is something she actively and continuously makes. Whether through the repetition of ritual acts, the styling of her hijab, her daily use of the *tasbih*, or the careful articulation of her spiritual journey in words, Meryem cultivates her faith through ongoing and embodied practice. In this way, her story points us to an important frame for understanding the experience of being Muslim in contemporary life: *devotional labor*.

Devotional labor, as revealed through Meryem's experience, is not limited to ritual performance alone. It encompasses the variety of small and sustained acts of care, discipline, and reflection that together give form to one's relationship with the Divine. In her commitment to prayer and fasting, we see how the disciplined spiritual surrender and bodily regimentation can deepen religious understandings. In her styling of her hijab and use of the digital *tasbih*, she shows how material choices become expressions and confirmations of interior devotion. And in her willingness to reflect, narrate, and share her religious journey, Meryem shows how the telling of one's own life story becomes a sacred act, a conscious effort to make meaning out of one's past and affirm their place in the moral, physical, and spiritual world of today.

What Meryem ultimately shows in her way of living is that religion is not only believed. It is enacted, styled, repeated, and spoken. It is shaped through emotions and aesthetics, through technology and memory. Hers is a life shaped by devotional labor, sustained by her active energies and the everyday work she does to draw closer to Allah. These acts are not incidental to her faith – they constitute it. They help create the version of a Muslim that Meryem strives to become.

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In recognizing the layered, active, and creative forms that Meryem's devotion takes, we come to understand religion not as a fixed system of belief, but as a dynamic and intimate way of making meaning. Her story shows that religion is neither fixed nor necessarily grand but can be found in the steady work of orienting one's body, choices, and words to a higher love. Through her devotional labor, Meryem draws the sacred into her everyday, inviting us to consider how religious life is not merely lived, but made.

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