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CHAPTER 2

Hybrid *Imams*: Young Muslims and Religious Authority on Social Media

Sana Patel

Introduction

For many religious communities, central religious authority is an essential part of identity, piety, and practice. Most Catholics look to the Pope for guidance in their everyday lives. Many Tibetan Buddhist communities consider the Dalai Lama to be the embodiment of religious authority. For Muslims, however, the definition of central religious authority is hotly debated—and often a cause of intrareligious conflict. Ismaili Muslims regard the Agha Khan as the one true authority, while the Bohri Muslim community looks up to Mufaddal Saifuddin as the supreme spiritual leader. Many Sufi Muslims are members of formal institutional *ṭarīqah* orders ("spiritual path") led by spiritual leaders who offer guidance. For the majority of Sunni Muslims around the globe, however, the concept of universal, exclusive, and absolute religious authority is not considered valid. Although *imams*—Muslim clerics who lead others in congregational prayer, often as head of mosques—are publicly recognized as authority figures who are well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), they do not claim any sort of divine lineage (unlike in other Muslim communities such as Shīʿī Islam). While *imams* operate at both local and international levels, they do not link *fatāwā* (Islamic legal rulings) to a single source of religious authority. Today, in many Sunni

communities *imams* operate in both online and offline spaces, providing services such as counseling, giving *khuṭbah*s (public lectures/sermons), and performing *nikah* (Islamic marriage rites), among other roles. In doing so, however, they typically do not claim to act as central religious authorities.

Before the digital media era—and the ubiquitous access to social media applications and networks on phones, laptops, and tablets—Sunni Muslims would often interact with *imams* in person at the local mosque or by telephone. As Muslims rapidly embraced "digital religion" by adopting an online presence on message boards, Question and Answer (Q&A) websites, institutional web pages, and other social media platforms, *imams* have learned to adapt to the virtual world.[1] With the expansive rise and easy accessibility of social media, accelerated by the unprecedented changes of Covid-19, *imams* and established religious institutions have increasingly shifted from offline to online spaces, creating a virtual and hybrid presence.

This chapter examines how young Muslims (aged eighteen to forty) in North America feel about religious authority in both online and offline spaces, and how certain prominent religious authority figures influence religious identity and religious/spiritual practices in their followers' everyday lives. My analysis illustrates how particular groups of young Muslims access religious authority—both virtually and in-person—in ways that shape the construction and experience of their religious identities, understandings, and practices. The data for this study comes from my own dissertation research based on fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019.[2] The participants were recruited from the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) conference: an annual gathering in Toronto that attracts over 20,000 Muslims and non-Muslims from around the world.[3] Pre-Covid-19, RIS took place in-person at the Toronto Metro Convention Centre. Many speakers at this event are considered to be prominent religious authority figures in the Sunni community, including Hamza Yusuf from California, Suleiman Moola from South Africa, Tariq Jamil from Pakistan, among others. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with selected participants regarding their religious identity and authority, their religious and spiritual practices in their everyday lives, their personal experiences as Muslims in Canada and the United States, their encounters with Islamophobia, and their use of the internet for religious purposes.

Narrowing the focus, this chapter spotlights issues relating to religious authority and social media, with a particular emphasis on lived religion. I begin with a brief survey of the scholarship on "digital religion" and Muslim religious authority on the internet before outlining my own theoretical and methodological frameworks. An analysis of the data from qualitative interviews documents how young Muslims perceive religious authority and authenticity in both online and offline spaces by spotlighting their interactions with prominent religious authority figures: Yasir Qadhi, Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman. This inquiry aims to address a number of key questions: How do young Muslims practice their religion

in their everyday lives? How do they "do" Islam on the internet? Which religious authorities do young Muslims "follow"/"like" on social media? And what specific roles do these authority figures play in the identity formation, worldviews, and practices of Muslim youth?

Surveying the Scholarship

In recent years, a select group of scholars have explored religion online in an effort to document how young people seek religious information and religious authority on the internet. For this chapter, the works of Heidi Campbell, Christopher Helland, and Stewart Hoover are especially relevant.

Campbell's edited volume *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds* consists of multiple essays on the topic of "digital religion" in various different cultural contexts.[4] In framing the volume, Campbell explains that the term "digital religion" does not simply refer to religion online but rather engages how digital media spaces and religious practices shape each other. Previously, scholars often employed the term "cyber-religion" to describe new activities online in relation to religious communities and rituals in cyberspace. By contrast, Campbell suggests that "digital religion" offers a more nuanced way to approach the technological and cultural landscapes that have made online and offline spaces integrated and blended. As the data in this chapter confirms, digital media—specifically social media—have facilitated new pathways for a new generation of young Muslims to connect with religious authority online.

Helland's article, "Diaspora on the Electric Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands," illustrates how diasporic religious traditions have leveraged the internet to develop network connections among themselves and with their places of origin.[5] Helland emphasizes the significance of community in religion, documenting how these diaspora groups deploy the internet not only to discuss religion and develop new religious practices but also to fulfill the particular needs of their communities by raising money, organizing volunteer labor, and networking with its members. Many of the participants in my research identified as members of diaspora communities—identities that at least partially influenced their ways of practicing Islam.

Hoover's edited collection *The Media and Religious Authority* examines the notion of religious authority in different traditions and how it is transformed by new media.[6] He argues that in order to understand the dynamic changes between religion and media, scholars should document the shifting forms of religious claims, values, and symbols. Accounting for these factors reveals new contexts of authority formation and the evolving contours of religious authenticity. In the interviews that I conducted, for example, some participants asserted that a clear definition of authority and authenticity is vitally important for Muslims, because it allows them

to navigate amid the vast array of religious leaders available in both online and offline spaces.

As a subset of the scholarship on digital religions, there is also a significant amount of research on Muslims in cyberspace, specifically on the complex interplay between Muslim religious authority and the internet. Among others, Gary R. Bunt, Nabil Echchaibi, Kristin M. Petersen, and Robert Rozehnal (all contributors to this edited volume) are considered important scholars in this expanding field. Notably, however, within the study of digital Islam research on how young Muslims—young Canadians and Americans in this case—navigate the world of online *imams* and negotiate religious information online is somewhat lacking. My research aims to address this gap.

Bunt's *Hashtag Islam* covers theoretical approaches for cyber Islamic environments (CIE)—a term that he coined to refer to the incredible variety of Muslim expressions on the internet. His study examines the emergent technologies impacting CIE, and their impact on faith and representation, religious authorities and its influences, and *jihād* online.[7] In relation to the question of religious authority online, Bunt focuses on how certain authorities are authenticated through the application of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) and examines what the development of the internet means for celebrity religious figures. In addition, he critically analyzes prominent *fatwā* websites like *IslamQA.info* and *eShaykh.com*. In my own interviews, many participants identified *IslamQA* as a website that they surfed in search of answers to their own religious questions.

Discussing how Muslim women engage with urban styles, fashion, and popular culture to challenge stereotypes of their own oppression, Kristin M. Peterson and Nabil Echchaibi analyze the #Mipsterz video in their article, "Mipsterz: Hip, American and Muslim."[8] In this video, young Muslim women challenge pervasive mass media stereotypes—like the standard trope that all Muslim women are oppressed—and illustrate, by contrast, how they exercise their own freewill and agency in their everyday lives. In presenting themselves in a non-normative way, these young women assert that they have their own distinct ways of practicing Islam. In a similar fashion, participants in my study embraced their own unique approach to religious practices and emphasized the importance of seeking religious authority outside of traditional religious institutions.

Rozehnal's method of analyzing Sufism online in *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience* approaches digital media as "carefully crafted and authorized documents that reveal a great deal about the values and priorities, the networks and narratives, of discrete American Sufi groups."[9] He suggests that many prominent American Sufi communities that are active in offline and online spaces display a hybrid religious identity that is modern, Muslim, and mystic. He demonstrates this by focusing on the Inayati Order and its sophisticated use of digital media as a case study throughout the book. Although my own fieldwork deals with young

Muslims who identify more with a traditional Sunni affiliation rather than Sufi orders, discovering Islam on social media apps also profoundly shapes how they think about and experience religious practices, the competing claims to authority and authenticity, and Islamic discourse online.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

This chapter places a significant emphasis on lived religion because it provides a framework to explore the ways that Islam is practiced in nonofficial and often unrecognized ways, outside the purview of established religious institutions like mosques and *madrassah*s (Islamic schools). Prominent scholars who have taken this approach include Robert A. Orsi,[10] Nancy Ammerman,[11] Meredith McGuire,[12] and Nadia Jeldt oft (who applies the theory to Islam).[13] Scholars of religious studies have often examined how religious institutions influence the piety and formal activities of practitioners such as attending church, praying *ṣalāh* (the formal act of prayer by Muslims five times a day), or volunteering in the community. Measuring religiosity solely by means of church or mosque attendance is problematic, however, because it focuses exclusively on those that are active within established religious institutions and ignores the less visible elements of religious life. Many people consider some of the normal activities that they engage in their everyday lives as religious or spiritual. According to Orsi, lived religion is about mundane practices, vital religious narratives, and anything that falls outside of institutional religion.[14] Ammerman also points out that the "everyday" of lived religion consists of (non) religious practices, rituals performed by people who are nonexperts, and daily practices that are outside the scope of institutional religious events in both public and private spheres.[15] Similarly, McGuire emphasizes that some of the participants in her research considered ordinary things like gardening or healing as vital religious or spiritual activities.[16] Jeldtoft uses the term "reconfigured religious practices" to describe how Muslims in her research customized their own individual routines of daily religious life—ritual activities that were not necessarily connected with an institutional form of Islam.[17]

A focus on lived religion allows us to look at how young Muslims engage with religious authority and to consider the non-normative ways that Islam is lived and understood. Are young Muslims in North America practicing Islam exclusively through religious institutions, or do they experience and express their own particular ways of being Muslim which includes distinct understandings of authenticity and authority? In this study, the lived religion approach brought to the surface a diversity of thinking about Muslim religious authority among my respondents. Their presence on social media—specifically on websites and apps like Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram—illustrated their connectedness with religious authority figures, whose content they "followed," "liked," and "retweeted." Some participants also actively utilized social media and the internet to conduct their own independent searches on religious matters, illuminating how they approach religious institutions and authority online.

For this study, I conducted a total of fifty interviews with young Muslims recruited at the RIS conference in 2018 and 2019. I informally recruited participants in 2018 by socializing with people at the RIS bazaar (marketplace). This large space was dedicated for businesses, nonprofit organizations, and food vendors who sell products and distribute information to curious conference-goers. A separate site was also designated for congregational prayer within this sprawling bazaar. The following year, I was given a formal booth at the bazaar to recruit participants for my research. I set up the booth by displaying recruitment material which consisted of interview invitations and posters. Potential participants approached me directly this time, instead of me having to reach out to them. Figure 2.1 shows how just crowded it can get in some areas of the RIS conference. This photo was taken right after a break had ended as attendees were waiting to enter the lecture halls for the next set of speakers. At this time, people were coming back from eating and praying in the bazaar.

FIGURE 2.1 *The crowd at the RIS conference in December 2019. This image displays the entrance area near the lecture halls on the left, with the bazaar straight ahead in the gymnasium area. Photo by the author.*

In order to participate in my study, conference attendees had to meet the following criteria: citizens or permanent residents of the United States or Canada, between the ages of eighteen and forty—,[18] self-identified as Muslims, maintain an active presence on social media, and attended the RIS conference in the past.[19] The criteria allowed me to focus on participants who identified as Muslim millennials (born between 1981 and 1996). Most of them identified as Sunni, with only a small subset identifying as Shiʿa or members of other Muslim minority communities. Over the course of the two years, fifty people volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interactions were conducted both in-person and virtually on Skype, Facetime video, or WhatsApp video. The average length of each interview was one hour.

In addition to these interpersonal interviews, my methodology also employed participant observation. RIS takes place over three days during the Christmas holidays, and people from all around the world come to attend and take part in the myriad activities. During these events, I observed many things including how people interacted with each other and, in particular, how some of them engaged with celebrity *imams* in attendance. Prominent speakers and celebrity *imams* like Zaid Shakir and Tariq Jamil were typically followed around by groups of admirers in the bazaar. Individuals would rush over to them to ask them a question or to offer a simple greeting. There was also an instance at the 2019 event, where an attendee jumped onto the stage to greet Tariq Jamil while he was giving his talk. This style of communication and interaction illustrated the dynamics of hierarchy created in the hybrid space of RIS. In my assessment, that hybridity emerges because the conference merges online and offline worlds, allowing participants to meet celebrity *imams* from their social media experience in a "real world," offline event. The following sections encapsulate these findings, with a spotlight on the central issue of religious authority.

Hybrid *Imams*: Online and Offline Religious Authority

Yasir Qadhi

Even though the idea of central religious authority is contested within the Muslim community, RIS effectively acts as a space where multiple religious authorities are brought together from both online and offline worlds. At each annual conference, many of the featured speakers are recognized as prominent religious authority figures for the North American Sunni Muslim community.

In 2018 and 2019, Yasir Qadhi was one of the featured speakers at RIS. Qadhi is an Islamic scholar based in Houston, Texas, and is one of the founders of AlMaghrib Institute, an online Islamic institution where users can take virtual classes with various Islamic teachers on a range of topics.[20] He has a doctorate from Yale University and teaches at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. In interviews, participants confirmed that they were motivated to attend this conference to learn from key religious authority figures like Qadhi. For example, Participant 26, a twenty-seven-year-old male who had recently immigrated to Canada, stated that he especially enjoyed Qadhi's lecture. In his words:

> I got to meet Shaykh Yasir Qadhi. I walked up to him and I was quite happy and very excited to meet him. . . . I think that was sensational, absolutely sensational, being there, sitting there and listening to him. It was a powerful twenty-to-twenty-five-minute speech that he gave. I've been trying to see, but it is still not up on YouTube. I would say hearing him, not just what he said but also the way he said it, his eloquence, his delivery, both languages. Everything was so powerful, so powerful.[21]

Since Qadhi is based in the United States, Canadians like P26 do not typically have easy access to interact with him in person, making this a special moment for him. Qadhi does have a prominent online presence and regularly posts on Facebook and Twitter; on Facebook one million people like and follow him, and there are more than 549,000 followers on Twitter. Although these social media platforms allow people to have some type of interaction with celebrity *imams*, these impersonal interactions do not compare to meeting them at an event or seeing them live in person. Young Muslims describe a fascination with seeing such religious authority figures face-to-face, equating it with meeting a popular celebrity. Participants talked in similar glowing terms about other well-known social media figures they got to see at RIS who they would otherwise never meet IRL ("in real life"). This included performers like Khaled Siddiq, a British musician and YouTuber, and Brother Ali, an American rapper and activist. Figure 2.2 is a photograph of Brother Ali performing at RIS in 2019—in an area reserved for musical performances, poetry, and small Q&A sessions with some of the invited guests.

In an interview, I asked Participant 20 (a thirty-two-year-old female who has spent the majority of her life in Canada) about how she navigates the internet when researching Islamic matters. She replied by saying, "I will have to learn it [Arabic] myself or get the trusted version [of the Qur'ān's translation] from somebody who's actually truly studied the Qur'ān like Yasir Qadhi or Nouman Ali Khan. I would think that would be the best because they've gone out of their way to study the Qur'ān itself."[22] Her response speaks to the issues of authenticity, the validity of religious information available online, and the legitimacy of these celebrity *imams*. What exactly

FIGURE 2.2 *Brother Ali performing songs from his previous albums at RIS 2019. This performance took place at the bazaar*'s *360 Stage. Photo by the author.*

makes the information that they preach and talk about trustworthy? P26 expressed a confidence in the educational credentials of these religious authority figures. In most cases, celebrity *imams* like Yasir Qadhi have traditional Sunni educational backgrounds. Although Qadhi has a Western educational background with a PhD from Yale, he also has a master's degree in Islamic theology from his studies in Saudi Arabia at the Islamic University of Medina. These dual qualifications raise his status with young Muslims who acknowledge the importance of both Western and Islamic education. Qadhi is regarded as an Islamic scholar who can relate to Muslims living in the West, hence his popularity with the Muslim millennials in this study.

Although many participants pointed to the educational backgrounds of these Islamic scholars as a measure of legitimacy and trustworthiness, others raised concerns regarding their authenticity. Participant 45, a twenty-eight-year-old female who has spent half of her life in Canada, revealed doubts about Qadhi and his Islamic teachings:

> I didn't know most of them [the speakers at RIS], but just recently I heard that Yasir Qadhi is not great. He was actually my favorite speaker. Apparently, the stuff that he says is not based on Qur'ān and *ḥādīth* [collections of the sayings and acts of Prophet Mohammed]. He just says things that are actually not allowed in Islam, which make me very concerned. I'm afraid to listen to the stuff, to his lectures because I don't know if I'm going be learning something that is wrong.[23]

Although Qadhi was previously one of her favorite speakers, the woman now questions his authority based on what she has heard from others. Her comment confirms that young Muslims in this community do not universally agree on the authenticity of particular clerics, even those with traditional backgrounds and formal training in Islamic jurisprudence. Participant 37, a twenty-three-year-old male who was born and raised in the United States, expressed a similar concern with the lack of knowledge and expertise of some of the RIS speakers. In his words, "Some of the speakers . . . I was confused as to why they were speaking on certain matters when they themselves acknowledged that they had no experienced knowledge on that matter, so I was a little bit confused by that I would say."[24] In my view, both these statements spotlight an underlying ambiguity and ambivalence about central religious authority figures in Sunni Islam. Analyzing the thoughts and experiences of participants on issues of religious authority reveals that some young Muslims are simply overwhelmed with the choices of religious authority in online spaces. Although most respondents were impressed with some of the authority figures accessible online, they were careful and deliberate about assessing trustworthiness and authenticity before accepting them as legitimate authority figures.

Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman

In interviews, many participants stressed that in addition to looking forward to interacting with famous Islamic scholars at conferences like RIS, they actively "followed" them on social media as well. For example, Participant 9 (a thirty-five-year-old man born in Canada) described himself as a social media follower of Suhaib Webb, one of the most prolific online *imams*. Webb was previously the *imam* at the Islamic Society of Boston. In 2016, he was especially popular among North American Muslim youth, famous for delivering eight-second *fatāwā* on Snapchat and his virtual sermons (*khuṭbah*s) that integrated references to popular media like the TV show, *The Walking Dead*.

Mufti Menk is another religious authority figure with a popular online profile among RIS conference participants. Based in Zimbabwe, Menk has over seven million global followers on Twitter. He is particularly known for

his motivational tweets and *khuṭbah*s that incorporate comedy to attract attention from young Muslims. For a twenty-eight-year-old Canadian female, Mufti Menk is as motivational as Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–73). "Mufti Menk was another person who I hadn't listened to, but someone was like you should read his posts," she stated.

> I follow him, his posts on social media because I absolutely love them. That guy is so synced in his words and some of them hit so close to home in my opinion, he's like Rumi. That's a big thing but some of his things are so well-said. It's so well written and I'm like he needs to start a book or calendar because we need one of those every day.[25] This woman's comparison of Menk to the famous thirteenth-century Persian Sufi master, Rumi, is revealing—even though Rumi has frequently been romanticized in the West as a poet who writes about love and spirituality, rather than Islam per se.[26]

Menk's online messaging clearly resonates with young Muslims living in the West. His tweets are typically communicated in comforting and encouraging tones, rather than a preaching rhetorical style. To take one example, on January 31, 2021, Menk tweeted: "There are some who will misunderstand you no matter what you say or do. They're just not meant to be on your journey. Remember, you're fulfilling your purpose, not theirs. So it calls for a different path. Don't worry. The Almighty will send people who should be in your life!" Menk's charisma has a unique appeal among his millions of loyal Twitter followers who are often mesmerized by his messages and admire his soft tone, as opposed to the stern preaching style of other *imams* like Yasir Qadhi. His legions of online fans, both Muslims and non-Muslims, even include celebrities like rappers Nicki Minaj. When Nicki Minaj first followed Menk on Twitter, it created a frenzy among young Muslims and non-Muslims

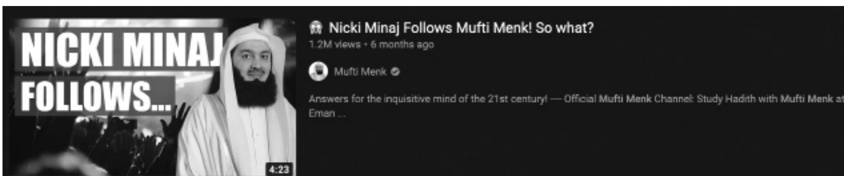

FIGURE 2.3 *Screenshot of Mufti Menk's YouTube video on Nicki Minaj following him on Twitter. This video, posted in August 2020, elicited more than 1.3 million views (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eczk1Ofk8UE).*

alike who debated what Menk had to offer her. In response to this tweet storm, Menk posted a YouTube video, stating that the Islamic information that he preaches is available to anyone, regardless of background (Figure 2.3).

Omar Suleiman is yet another celebrity *imam* who was especially popular among the young Muslims at RIS. Also based in the United States, Suleiman is a founder of Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research—which mainly operates online—and an adjunct professor of Islamic studies at Southern Methodist University. He too maintains an active and dynamic digital profile, with over two million followers on Facebook. Like Menk, many participants emphasized Suleiman's charismatic personality when giving *khuṭbah*s and public lectures at events like RIS. When asked whether she was looking forward to seeing any specific *imams*, Participant 25 (a twenty-eight-year-old female, who immigrated to Canada from Jordan) responded:

> I guess one person that I was really looking forward to from the talk was Shaykh Omar Suleiman. I really respect his work and his approach taking certain topics and addressing them in a very easy to understand kind of way and in a way that makes you feel uplifted and feeling hopeful that there's something that you can do, whether personally or communally as a community.[27]

In a similar fashion, Participant 10, a twenty-three-year-old female born in Canada, described being moved by Suleiman's speech at the 2018 RIS conference. In her words, "Omar Suleiman's speech was all about forgiveness and how [to] go through life when someone hurts you intentionally or not, and I feel like that really affected me. I even bought the CD. Because I thought it was really good what he said because everybody goes through hardships and everybody experiences someone that hurts them."[28] In these instances, the attraction to Suleiman was about more than his ability to relate to Muslims living in non-Muslim Western countries. Participants highlighted instead the unique environment that Suleiman created when delivering his lectures. They were drawn to his captivating style and clearly resonated with the message that he was trying to get across to the audience. This is one salient example of how Muslim authority figures like Suleiman capture their audience's attention by cultivating a unique personal communication style, both online and offline.

Authenticity and Social Media

Since cyberspace is so vast, unlimited, and malleable, it creates spaces for all kinds of communities and individuals to share information, develop friendships and relationships, and discover pathways to navigate online in relation to religious matters. Many of the participants in this research, however, also described their thoughts and anxieties about the authenticity of information accessible on the internet. A key concern was the sheer volume and varying quality of sources of Islamic information online. Participants found that it was ultimately up to them to filter through the ocean of digital

information to find what they personally would consider authentic and to then interpret those materials via *ijtihād*.

Some participants emphasized that they turned to the internet for guidance on specific topics. Participant 9, for example, a thirty-five-year-old male who worked as a chaplain in the Canadian army, said that he only utilizes the internet for matters like Islamic finance since he already has trustable sources for other issues. "Sometimes I go on the internet though, for questions that are very new, and very kind of . . . things like Islamic finance . . . the internet is a pretty good resource," he stated. "But I know how the people are. When people say, 'I know who the authority is who I can rely upon.'"[29] Participant 3, a twenty-one-year-old female who was born and raised in the United States, described her preference for "authentic" websites that she trusts such as *Seeker's Hub*, an Islamic institution based in Toronto: "I think if it is an authentic website, then I would use it. Like I think *Seeker's Hub* has a question-and-answer forum. So, I mean I would go there if the answer was there, I would go there. I would trust it. Just randomly Googling it, I wouldn't trust."[30]

For most RIS participants, however, this search for dependable resources prompted them to look for particular textual sources such as canonical collections of *ḥādīth* like Sahih Bukhari or direct *āyāt* (verses) from the Qur'ān as a signal of authenticity. Several respondents described a desire to learn Arabic themselves in order to translate and interpret these religious sources on their own. Participant 45 emphasized that she specifically searches for online sources that cite the Qur'ān and *sunnah* (practices of Prophet Mohammad): "If it is from Qur'ān and *sunnah*, *ḥādīth* . . . authentic *ḥādīth* then I have to believe that. The other thing is the best thing we can do is learn Arabic to learn the highest possible translation and do your own reading and even in *ḥādīth* and so on."[31] In my view, this can be considered a form of democratizing *ijtihād*—a process of interpretation that was historically done exclusively by Islamic scholars who were trained in traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Increasingly, young Muslims who lack such classical training but do have access to digital materials that aid in reading and understanding Islamic legal concepts are claiming the right and responsibility to interpret tradition on their own. In this sense, Islamic authority is no longer reserved exclusively for trained clerics.

Table 2.1 displays the number of followers for each of the religious authority figures discussed earlier on three of the most popular social media platforms that were identified by the participants: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In interviews, participants described using social media on a regular basis and most of them confirmed that they actively follow celebrity *imams* and Muslim influencers on these specific digital apps. Although select respondents expressed some concern in relation to the scholars' authority and authenticity, these celebrity *imams* have nonetheless managed to build massive online platforms which draw large audiences to their virtual preaching and conversations. This following includes people from all

TABLE 2.1 Followers of Each Islamic Scholar. Tabulated as of March 2021

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Yasir Qadhi[a]	1,104,400	549,500	187,000
Mufti Menk[b]	4,340,900	7,200,00	2,900,00
Suhaib Webb[c]	964,000	122,500	105,000
Omar Suleiman[d]	2,583,800	447,200	816,000

[a]Qadhi's Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/yasir.qadhi/
[b]Menk's Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/muftimenk/
[c]Webb's Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/suhaib.webb/
[d]Suleiman's Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/imamomarsuleiman/

around the world where social media is accessible, including considerable numbers of non-Muslims. The global popularity of these Islamic scholars shows that they have adapted to the social media age, finding creative ways to continue to preach in new ways to new audiences. Given the ubiquity, speed, and reach of social media apps, young Muslims can easily reach out to and access material from these celebrity *imams* rather than turning to local, analog resources. The remarkably large numbers of followers illustrate again how trust and authenticity are built by these celebrity *imams* via a savvy deployment social media platform.

Being a celebrity *imam* is about more than just preaching at a local mosque. Even so, these *imams* display a wide variety of linkages to (or distance from) established religious institutions. It is important to note that in some cases their social media platforms are independently owned and operated. For example, Webb and Menk do not affiliate with any formal religious institutions and post on social media independently. Other celebrity *imams*, by contrast, expressly link their digital media profiles to particular institutions—emphasizing their official relationships with prominent Islamic institutions and established careers within large organizations such as ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) or Qalam Institute. Qadhi was previously associated with AlMaghrib Institute but now affiliates with the Islamic Seminary of America based in Dallas, Texas. Suleiman emphasizes his links to the religious institution that he founded and regularly posts on Yaqeen Institute's social media accounts.

This new dynamic of finding and interacting with religious authority figures on social media resonates with the broader concepts of digital media, religion online, and online religion. Rather than going to the local mosque to ask a religious question to the *imam*, young Muslims increasingly opt to simply go online. There they have access to multiple trained scholars, as well as a wide range of self-styled Islamic "experts" who can answer their

inquiries. If users are not satisfied or want to learn more, they can decide to interpret meaning for themselves by studying Islamic materials and practicing independent *ijtihād*. In my view, these online opportunities for lived religion provide young Muslims with alternative methods to take matters into their own hands, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of institutional religious authority. These alternative pathways of practicing Islam illustrate a new sense of freedom to define the parameters of religious authority and to choose how and where to access it. Many participants in this study identified more than one celebrity *imam* that they looked up to. Factors that contributed to their selection included having easy access to them on social media platforms, their relevance to young Muslims living in the West, and the background of their traditional educational training. For those participants who wanted to practice *ijtihād*, the easy accessibility of religious information online allowed them to do so. Pervasive questions about authenticity, however, prompted most of them to refer back to celebrity *imams* who offered informed and practical advice on all kinds of matters, from general questions about Qur'ān interpretation and ritual practice to specific issues like Islamic finance.

When asked about how they practice Islam in their everyday lives, almost all of the RIS participants mentioned the "five pillars" of mainstream Islam: expressing belief in the oneness of Allah, praying five times a day, giving to charity, fasting during *Ramaḍān*, and performing pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, they also identified some additional ritual practices that shape their daily, lived piety. This included reciting a certain amount of *juz'* (one of thirty sections that the Qur'ān is divided into) every day, fasting every Monday and Thursday per *sunnah*, and sitting in a silent space and speaking directly to God as a form of meditation. The concept of lived religion allows us to account for the importance of these kinds of personal religious and spiritual practices that are often done outside of formal religious institutions—and beyond the influence of formal religious authority.

The ways that participants navigated and negotiated the spoken and unspoken rules and regulations of Islamic practices suggest that they frequently interpreted the viability of some everyday practices on their own (*ijtihād*), without the need for religious authority or institutions. For example, Participant 12 (a twenty-eight-year-old female born in the United States) talked about the (in)significance of wearing makeup while doing *wuḍū'* (ablution)—even though there is a general understanding among the majority of *imams* in the Sunni community that makeup invalidates the *wuḍū'* required before praying *ṣalāh*. She explained that she has bigger things to be concerned about than worry about makeup and ablution:

> Some people ask like can you wear mascara with *wuḍū'*. Like to me, that's not a big deal, like I'm sure God is worried about other things than something so trivial . . . like okay good if you really want to know, but

> I'm not dying to know that answer. I'm focusing on the bigger picture personally. Which is why I like RIS, it was very big picture.[32]

Participant 50 (a twenty-three-year-old female who immigrated to Canada from Pakistan) echoed similar concerns about the regulation of small matters, such as the visibility of a Muslim woman's hair or the proper positions for prayer. In her view, some issues are not as relevant as some religious authorities make them out to be. In her words:

> I don't think God is going to judge me if I misfolded a leg this way while I am praying, Oh no!, a strand of hair came out while I am praying and all of a sudden, my prayer is not completed. I don't like the idea of overregulation and I feel like those things come to light when you're looking for very specific answers. For example, I know *IslamQ&A* is a go-to site for everyone. I will go there but then I will see very aggressive replies sometimes or they will be like no, this is wrong.[33]

Significantly, her critique questions the authority and authenticity of the popular *fatwā* website, *IslamQ&A*—a digital resource that is designed for Muslim users to search for questions that they have, with answers provided by *imams* formally trained in Islamic jurisprudence.

When navigating through the limitless Islamic resources and digital *fatāwā* on the internet, young Muslims in North America not only have to choose between different *imams* for guidance, they also have to define what is "authentically" Islamic. The massive volume of religious information online informs their religious identities and understandings of Islam in unprecedented ways. Amid the multiplicity of websites like *IslamQ&A*, social media interactions with celebrity *imams*, and the constant stream of materials found on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, young Muslims seek to create their own ways of practicing Islam and formulate religious identity. While it is true that having unlimited access to religious resources on the internet is beneficial for many young Muslims, the unprecedented volume of information also presents doubts and tensions. The participants in my study displayed a hesitation to default to one or more resources in relation to Islamic questions. They always questioned the legitimacy of sources of information that they found online. Although they did frequently identify certain websites that they found trustable—like *IslamQ&A* and *Seeker's Hub*—they typically filtered through these websites to research certain topics or to look out for specific references to *āyāt* and *sunnah*. Similarly, they also questioned the authenticity of the celebrity *imams* that they themselves "followed" or "liked" on social media. This illustrates the key point that within the North American Sunni community there is no central religious authority—a reality that, in turn, has encouraged young Muslims in North America to practice *ijtihād* to help them navigate through the immense online landscape.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, religious authority online is readily available, offering multiple perspectives on a wide range of matters public and private, spiritual and mundane. In response to this new dynamic, tech-savvy celebrity *imams* have quickly adapted to the social media age by amplifying their online profiles, curating accounts on trendy social media platforms, and encouraging their followers to interact with them on these apps. Young Muslims who have a difficult time with religious authority figures at the local level increasingly discover what they are searching for online via social media and *fatwā* websites. In keeping with the concept of lived religion, it is clear that Muslim millennials have a diverse approach to religious authority and authenticity. While some participants at the RIS conference still look up to certain religious authority figures, they also described a pattern of turning to online searches for religious matters. In discussing the accessibility of Islamic authority figures online, RIS participants consistently highlighted issues of authenticity and the significance of the hybridity of celebrity *imams*. My research found that the accessibility and personal styles of celebrity *imams* in *both* online and offline spaces are crucially important factors for young Muslims in North America. Even when conducting independent *ijtihād* using online resources, Muslim millennials tend to defer back to the expertise of *imams* when their uncertainties or doubts remain unresolved.

Although many young Muslims in North America turn to the internet to search for what they are lacking in offline spaces, they still find that issues of religious authority and authenticity are not so easily resolved. The participants in this study struggled for new answers to old questions: What does religious authority look like and how can its authenticity be determined? Celebrity *imams* like Yasir Qadhi, Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman offer these young Muslims novel opportunities to relate to figures of religious authority in online spaces where they can "follow," "like," and "retweet." The annual RIS conference plays an important role in uniting young Muslims with celebrity *imams* in an offline forum, where they interact face-to-face in a hybrid setting. With new trends continuing to emerge online—and with an endless array of social media apps like TikTok constantly adapting in response to these changes—celebrity *imams* will have to continuously transform how they engage and interact with their followers if they hope to stay relevant in the years ahead.