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Scriptural contentions: challenging the heteronormative translational hermeneutics of the Qur'an through the voices of Queer* Muslims[1] in Turkey

I. Rigid Islamic conservatism and Queer* sexual politics in Turkey

'If a child is given to a homosexual family, then this runs counter to the general moral values and religious beliefs of [Turkish] society', the President of the Republic of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, upon being asked what he thought of the 'scandalous' incident when a Dutch boy of Turkish origin was taken from his abusive Turkish parents and consigned to a lesbian foster family in Holland

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1   Throughout the paper, as long as my interlocutors did not specify how they like to be referred to, I employ the term *Queer** whenever I refer to individuals with non-heteronormatively sexualised and gendered subjectivities – a myriad of gender and sexual identities, including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, bi+, trans*, intersex, queers, non-binaries, asexuals, greysexuals, demisexuals, aromantics, genderfucks, gender non-conforming and others who do not identify themselves as allosexual or alloromantic. I opt for a once-pejoratively used term since I see politically empowering potentialities in reclaiming and re-appropriating a slur, turning it into a linguistic instrument of defiance against homonegativity. The asterisk use is a homage to Halberstam's term *Trans**, through which I similarly maintain the volatility and permeability of identities as well as differentiating it from those who identify themselves specifically as 'queer'. Moreover, I assert that this usage enables us to be sensitive to the local resistances towards Queer theory, a Western theory of gender and sexual subjectification in origin, as well as to the future possibilities of transformation and authentic synthesis by non-Western Queer* subjects.

(Baklinski, 2013). This statement of Erdoğan, whose stance apropos of gender equality and sexual liberation has always been in accordance with the cultural conservatism and populist concessions of his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, trans. JDP), did not surprise any close followers of Turkish politics at the time, as JDP leaders and representatives, ever since its formation, have constructed the political identity of the party according to conservative traditions and centrist policies (Altınordu, 2016, p. 163). Over the years, these conservative traditions have been systematically articulated in reference to orthodox Islamic doctrines on family, gender relations, and sexuality (particularly those of Sunni Islam), which delineate the standards of 'proper' intimacy and sexual morality for many JDP supporters. Gradually increasing the intensity of their systemic discrimination and institutionalised violence against Queer* individuals in Turkey since 2008 (Savcı, 2021), JDP politicians and authorities have become more and more intolerant against Queer* people in Turkey, evident in the recently recurring theme of anti-Queer* sentiments in their political rallies and even in the Friday sermons. As feminist/Queer* movements have gained further impetus since the Gezi Park protests, there has emerged an organised political focus by JDP leaders and the partisan journalists on the looming 'threat' of the dissolution of the family as a social institution due to the 'devious' schemes of 'Western Powers', which are said to be funding, lobbying, and encouraging the LGBTQ+ organizations to 'end Turkey'.

Even though Ali Erbaş, the Head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), had targeted Queer* individuals in Turkey numerous times before, having once claimed that the coronavirus epidemic was a divine punishment on humankind due to the practice of homosexuality which he proclaimed to be a 'heresy' and a 'big sin' (Duvar English, 2020), the organised hostility of JDP officials towards Queer* individuals rose to insurmountable levels of intimidation and criminalisation following the Boğaziçi University protests (see UN Urgent Action Letter, 2021 for a summary). Following the incident in which five Boğaziçi students were taken into custody over a picture of the Kaaba at a students' art exhibition, a few JDP officials and ministers, including Süleyman Soylu, the Minister of the Interior, Abdülhamit Gül, the Former Minister of Justice, and Melih Bulu, the politically appointed former rector of Boğaziçi University, called Queer* people 'perverts', 'dirt', and 'disgrace' in their social media accounts (Tar, 2021). As the recent examinations of JDP's policies and attitudes towards Queer* individuals in Turkey demonstrate (Savcı, 2021; Özbay & Öktem, 2021), the level of homonegativity[2]

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2   The term *homonegativity* is preferred over the term *homophobia*, recognising that the use of 'phobia' has explicit psychological connotations of 'irrational' fear towards things and people, whereas negative and shaming attitudes towards Queer* individuals continue to

and hostility towards the Queers* demands for equal citizenship rights, and legal protection has been an identifying characteristic of the moral values JDP leaders and supporters have been viciously promoting since 2015, the first time Queer* individuals were attacked at the annual Pride March in İstanbul.

However, following Erdoğan's statement on the Boğaziçi protests, which claimed that 'there was no such thing as LGBT in Turkey', a 2002-dated video of Erdoğan in *Abbas Güçlü ile Genç Bakış* (a former popular TV program) recirculated on social media platforms, depicting a university student asking Erdoğan about his views regarding LGBT rights in Turkey. Visibly bewildered by the question at first, Erdoğan then responds by stating the necessity of addressing and legally securing the individual rights and freedoms of homosexuals in Turkey (T24, 2021). While this statement may be interpreted as an unfulfilled promise or a tactical appeal at the time, through which Erdoğan might have aimed to attract and influence a larger number of citizens, it nevertheless marks the first, and probably the last time, a JDP representative affirmatively enunciated the individual rights and freedoms of Queer* individuals in Turkey. Although the sincerity of Erdoğan's words in 2002 is easily questionable now, some Queer* Muslims, even if their expectations did not directly coincide with JDP's public messages and political stance, felt some sort of affinity towards it because of the party's promise for a less 'selective' secularisation, which meant that Muslim individuals' daily life practices in public areas would no longer be a matter of governmental interference and/or political discussion, as was the case in Turkey's infamous headscarf controversy (Kuru, 2007). However, this earlier focus on individual freedom was soon replaced by strict limitations on any practice or discourse that defied or conflicted with JDP's political and ideological interests, as the recent events recapped above illustrate.

Unmistakably though, JDP's renunciation of the failed 'Just Order' model of the former right-wing Islamist party, the Welfare Party (trans. RP), and its idiosyncratic appropriation of the democratic and neoliberal discourses, had attracted and recruited numerous citizens to their side in the early days (Tuğal, 2009, pp. 50–55), among whom was a group of Queer* Muslims who defined themselves as a group of conservative JDP supporters. Following the assembling of this group in 2015 and their rapid popularisation in the media, they were fetishised and ridiculed at the same time, for they were believed to be a 'perfect oxymoron' considering JDP's anti-libertarian stance on sexual freedom and gender equality. However,

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manifest themselves even when there are no such cases of psychological fear. Moreover, the preferred term has a richer sociological context, where socialisation processes and societally-held beliefs may be brought into discussions more effectively.

this organisation soon dissolved after the members were outed by a journalist, while they also suffered from serious financial problems that prevented them from turning into an official organisation (Selici, 2019). While the recent political events palpably highlight the unlikelihood of a similar contact between JDP ranks and Queer* individuals in the near future, it remains to be further investigated whether JDP's homonegative policies against Queer* people in Turkey were ignited by AKLGBT's 'shocking' statements and/or how Queer* Muslims (JDP supports or not) were affected by the contradictory executions of JDP's earlier (pre-2011) and later policies (post-2011)[3] remain to be further investigated. Although I do not aim to document and explore the post-2011 hardships experienced by Queer* Muslims, these stories come forth as defining moments of breaking point in the ways my interlocutors were precipitated to rethink what it meant for them to be Queer* and Muslim at the same time.

II. Queer* hermeneutics of Islam: searching for a Queer* believer

A brief account of the key political events in the recent history of Turkey's Queer* Liberation movement[4] has been provided above to accentuate the eminent role of religion in the lives of Queer* people in Turkey who have long been told that they were 'doomed for eternity' just for being their authentic selves. More im-

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3   The temporal line of separation regarding the significant changes in JDP's policies, plans, law amendments, annulments, and regulations has been delineated according to Altınordu's argument, which states that by the end of 2011, JDP had established an infrastructure, a facilitating base, strengthened by 'constitutional reforms, changes in the judicial, military, and civil personnel', which made counteractions and difference of opinion less likely to emerge and sustain itself (Altınord 2016, p. 148).

4   The histories of Queer* liberation movements in Turkey span over 30 years, even though the presence of Queer* individuals in the Middle-Eastern geographies abound in the literary and legal records of the Ottoman history, which have ideologically been left out due to heteronormative history-writing (Bardakçı, 1992; Andrews & Kalpaklı, 2005). However, the first collective actions in Turkey's Queer* past date to 1993, when the first volunteer-based Queer* organisations Lambda and KaosGL were founded in İstanbul and Ankara, respectively. Thanks to the unyielding vigor of these organisations and the activists in the mid-1990s, it has become, since 2003, a tradition for Queers* in Turkey to march in the last week of every June to publicly express the pride they feel in their genders and sexualities without feeling ashamed or fearing the consequences of public avowal. Yet, a 'rupture' happened in 2015, when the Pride Parade was banned by İstanbul Governor's Office for it was initially claimed that it concurred with Ramadan, and therefore, would have been against their religious values. Before this ban, which persists up to this day, the Pride Parade had seen its largest population of 50.000 marchers in 2013.

portantly, it portrays how the Turkish state has contributed to maintaining and recirculating homonegative discourses and practices on religious, administrative, and legal grounds. From the President of the State to the Head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, many influential figures have played their parts in the proliferation of homonegative discourses that situate Queer* desires and identities against Islamic doctrines. These homonegative discourses are prevalent to such an extent that even those who do not identify as Muslim believers are affected by them in their daily lives since Turkey is arguably one of the countries which 'are more receptive to religious framing of politics owing to long-standing fusion of religious and national identities' (Gryzmala-Busse 2015, p. 429). Religion in Turkey plays an incommensurable part in restructuring and actualizing Queer* sexual politics, crystallising a particular set of moral and aesthetic preferences, and attuning the imagined 'cosmic order' of the believers to the human sphere (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). It is this strong salience of religious identities that incites JDP supporters to turn to the homonegative Islamic narratives, and it is through these discriminatory narratives and messages that they construe their standards of morality and decency. Through the politicisation of religious identity and the nationalization of religion via the support of religious institutions (Lord, 2018), Queer* people in Turkey have been reframed as *personae non-gratae*, who have been recast as the 'foreign agents of Western influence'. Accordingly, orthodox Islamic discourses on Queer* sexuality have been central to JDP officials' and adherent journalists' attempts at pathologising and criminalising Queer* sexualities, arguing that homosexuality is a sin (*haram)*, which meant a total rejection of Queer* people.

Even though the classical approach[5] imagines the relationship between religion and sexuality to be antagonistic in essence, one does not need to consider the two (religion and sexuality) as necessarily opposing. On the contrary, religion and sexuality may be thought of as co-constitutive by distancing and reconfiguring themselves through the different values and norms that they refer to, continuously adapting to the times and 'junctures' that force them to transform. Therefore, religious morality and sexuality, in a symbiotic manner, have historically relied

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5   On the fervent dynamics between religion and sexuality, Weber wrote that 'the brotherly
     ethic of salvation religion is in profound tension with the greatest irrational force of life:
     sexual love. The more sublimated sexuality is, and the more principled and relentlessly
     consistent the salvation ethic of brotherhood is, the sharper is the tension between sex
     and religion.' (Weber, 1946, p. 343). Weber emphasised the rational and regulating ten-
     dency of organised religions to control and discipline sexualities on the grounds of moral
     indecency. According to his formulation, religion, one of the Weberian 'value spheres',
     casts the other, sexuality, as the 'diabolic power endangering salvation'.

on each other, both being conceived as typical matters of private life under the scrutiny of secular modernity (Mahmood, 2016, p. 9). As unpredictable and irrational as death, sexuality has unsurprisingly been one of the most widely discussed and controversial topics of our worldly existence, not only in the works of religious scholars and the clergy but also in Western medical and social sciences – an enigma to which Abrahamic religions had provided specific explanations (mostly essentialising ones) and 'proper' ways of intimacy and sexual practices. In the light of the recent work on the socio-political conditions and the daily lives of Queer* individuals in Turkey (Bereket & Adam, 2006; Gürsu & Elitemiz, 2012; Görkemli, 2014; Özbay, 2022) which demonstrate that contemporary homosexual identities and sexual practices are being authentically co-constructed in the double bind of ever-disseminating, globalised Western sexual politics and the social, cultural, and political forces of local particularities, I suspect that religious beliefs, norms, and practices are interwoven with the formation and reorganising of Queer* people's sexual and gender identities due to the acute confluence of human rights politics and religion in Turkey, even if one might decide to distance themselves from religion and lead a non-religious life.

As Hendricks (2016) aptly displays the extent to which a Queer* Muslim's affective, psychological, and religious experiences are negatively influenced by homonegative discourses on their gender and sexual identities, when Islamic doctrines form the bases of a believer's construals as to how they should live, love, and relate to others, hermeneutics pose several critical problems within the framework of interpreting and translating Qur'anic narratives. As it is provided in the following sections in detail, various alternative modes of translational strategies have been proposed for constructing Queer*-affirmative interpretations of Islam without being forced to renounce one's religious beliefs and sentiments *and* one's investment in Queer* sexual politics. Culturally-oriented perspectives on translation studies regard translation as a site of continuous renegotiation and reproduction of multiple meanings – a 'multidimensional site of cross-lingual correspondence on which diverse social tasks are performed' (Porter, 2010, as cited in Spurlin, 2017, p. 173). In many circumstances, translation determines how one reaches 'foreign' information and comprehends the message and the meanings imbued within. Linking the pivotal role of translation to the socio-political and using it as a methodology, Savcı argues that translation is one of the sites through which we can examine how 'meaning is made in practice and how changes in language and in practice inform each other'. Savcı goes on to state that 'this has particular salience as political language and political practice are deeply linked, informing what we come to imagine as a politically viable future' (2018, p. 80). The political nature of translation practices and translational hermeneutics, which have long

served crucial functions in determining the content and messages of religious narratives and doctrines, came to the front as central themes of scriptural contention and reinterpretation in my in-depth interviews.[6]

Informed by the determining role of translation practices and translational hermeneutics[7] as implicitly ideological and political endeavours, this study initially aims to examine the ways in which Queer* Muslims in Turkey experience their religious and sexual identities and their various strategies for challenging contradictions (if they experience any) in their intersecting identities. Concordant with the function of translation practices on the generation and reception of homonegative statements, brief background information is provided below as to the terminology used in the Qur'an regarding Queer* sexualities while disambiguating inconsistencies regarding these concepts that have been postulated to manifest themselves in accordance with their socio-historical correspondence. After examining how the interlocutors in this study challenge (i) Qur'anic narratives

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6   While this project started back in 2014 when I became interested in this area of inquiry as I was preparing a research paper for an undergraduate course in Translation Studies, the first in-depth interview I conducted with a Queer* Muslim took place in 2018 when I started working on my Master's thesis. The first round of the interviews was limited to four interviews, while the second round of the interviews, which I conducted in 2019, included five more. Hence, the material that I make use of here is taken from seven in-depth interviews with Muslim-identifying Queer* individuals living in İstanbul between 2014–2019. As a lot has changed in terms of JDP's policies and attitude towards Queers* during this period, the latter interviews revolved around less hopeful and more anxiety-inducing topics and themes for the interlocutors and their experiences of being a Queer* Muslim in Turkey. All the names are pseudonyms picked by the interviewees themselves, and all the excerpts have been revised and affirmed by the interlocutors after the writing process.

7   In this paper, when I refer to 'scriptural hermeneutics' or 'Queer* hermeneutics', I rely on Abraham's approach towards Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and how he exemplifies Ricoeurean hermeneutic system in Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics with the case of Queer Muslim Hermeneutics (Abraham, 2007). According to this convergence model (that of Ricoeurean Bible Hermeneutics and Progressive Muslim Organizations and Scholars Queer Hermeneutics on the Qur'an), Queer* subjects are not only the recipients and the audience of the scriptural message, but they are also the subjects of the retainment and interpretation of the holy message (p. 4). The Ricoeurean premise acknowledges that multiple interpretations of a text attain their force and legitimacy from the lives of its readers, and the actions compelled by the text and its interpretations are good as long as they enable 'liberating, compassionate, or politically progressive' praxis (p. 9). Consequently, I believe that there are 'better' translations and interpretations in the sense that they reflect the central message of their source texts (Bible's and Qur'an's universal messages for love, acceptance, and just world).

and (ii) the Qur'anic terminology on Queer* sexuality, it will be problematised why the creative modes of alternative hermeneutics (Yip, 2005) are less likely to be employed by Queer* Muslims in Turkey than by their Western counterparts. In the concluding passages, after recapping the translational and re-interpretive strategies employed by these interlocutors vis-à-vis the dominant, heteronormative messages of the politico-religious orthodoxy in Turkey, it is debated whether the strategies employed by the Queer* Muslims in this study can be incorporated into Islamic theological hermeneutics, and what sorts of democratic actions may be necessary for Queer* Muslims in Turkey to freely practice their religion without turning their back on their Queer* desires.

III. Anti-heteronormative translational hermeneutics as Queer* resistance

Until very recently, most studies focusing on the lived experiences of Queers* have made little attribution to the substantial influence of their religious beliefs and spiritual striving, only reporting that religious beliefs and sentiments may have a protective effect on the maintenance of a healthy psychological state and interpersonal relations (Hoffman et al., 2006). Even then, these claims have been proposed mostly related to Christian Queer* communities (Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Yip 1996; Yip, 2000) or Jewish Queer* communities (Shilo, Yossef, and Savaya, 2016), whereas in Muslim countries the pertinent scenarios follow rather divergent roads, most of which could either end in Queer* individuals' rejection of the religious beliefs of the society they are born into, or even in some countries where it is illegal to be gay, being stoned to death according to these countries' legal sanctions (i.e., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan). Similarly, when it comes to conservative religious institutions and authorities, Queers* all over the world are faced with manifold negative, exclusionary statements, most of which directly condemn homosexuality, while some of these statements are more ambiguous as seen in the biblical idea of 'Love the sinner, hate the sin'. Whether their messages are ambiguous or not, it has been shown that homonegative statements have been perceived as being painful enough for some individuals to contribute to the development of suicidal ideation (Hoffman et al., 2007) as well as being correlated with their suffering higher rates of abuse, bullying, and victimisation, and higher levels of mental illness (King et al., 2008, Gibbs, 2015; Kidd et al., 2016; Lytle et al., 2018). As it can be seen in these meta-analyses, most of the recent research has been conducted in the psychological sciences, even though there are a few fundamental studies that emphasise the source; the Qur'an, and the importance of the Islamic doctrines and narratives on Queer* sexuality that negatively affect

the lives of Queer* Muslims (Jamal, 2001; Habib, 2008; Hendricks, 2010; Kugle, 2010; Ali, 2006, Siraj, 2016; Zahed, 2019).[8]

Since the early 1990s, a growing number of Feminist and Queer* Muslims have adamantly contested the cisheteronormative and heteropatriarchal interpretations and translations of specific verses in the Qur'an which refer to the 'homosexual' communities of the infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These 'Progressive Muslims' advance the poetic style and the polysemic language of the Qur'an as the fulcrum of their criticism against the prevalent homonegative discourses in their societies, propounding that the Arabic term *liwat* has been ideologically translated in an anachronistic fashion that does not reflect the socio-cultural historicity of the time – a timeline spanning over almost 25 years from the beginning of the first revelation in 609 CE (Schmidtke, 1999; Ali, 2006). Most of these counter-arguments were initially formulated by a small number of academicians, whose seminal works (Ali, 2006; Habib, 2007; Kugle, 2010; Hendricks, 2010) focused on the real-life experiences of Queer* Muslims. In addition to the early scholarly work and activism on Queer* Muslims, a growing number of organisations have appeared since then professing their Queer*-affirmative perspectives, notably Al-Fatiha, The Inner Circle, and the Al-Ghurbaah Foundation (Minwalla et al., 2005)[9]. In the same vein, a few religious leaders and imams in England, France, Germany, Sweden, South Africa, Canada, and the United States have explicitly created Queer*-affirmative spaces and communities for their congregations (BBC News, 2013) with Muhsin Hendricks and Daaiyye Abdullah being two of the first figures in this respect. The central organising principle of these communities has been to challenge the ubiquitous homonegativity expressed by their heterosexual Muslim 'brothers and sisters', and the traditional hermeneutics concerning Queer* sexualities in Islam. As Smith noted, the main goal of such translational and re-interpretive attempts is not to 'manipulate the content of their sacred texts to fit the political needs of the moment.

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8   In addition to these sources, please see the articles on the special volume of the journal 'Theology & Sexuality' (2016, Vol. 22) edited by Hoel and Henderson-Espinoza with the title of 'Approaching Islam Queerly'. One of the most fundamental pieces in the volume are as follows (personally selected): Kugle's article on lesbian sexuality in the Qur'an, Rahmani and Valliani's piece (2016) on LGBT Muslims in Canada, and Hendricks' phenomenal work on 'ijtihad'. For a more clinical and health science-oriented review, see the multiple works of Jaspal (2010–2021) and also Tellawi, Khanpour, and Rider's paper 'Navigating (Queer) Sexuality in Islam' (2020).

9   In addition to these organisations and initiatives, more than 30 LGBT Muslim organisations are listed worldwide, as listed on Salaam Canada's website. Additional information can be found on the websites of 'Muslims for Progressive Values', 'Queer Ummah: A Visibility Project', 'Hidayah LGBT', 'Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity'.

The point is that the religious authority of sacred texts generally exhibits in openness and flexibility that can often facilitate the legitimation of a variety of organizational and strategic-tactical forms, as social movements may need them.' (1996, p. 18). However, the 'creative' modes of alternative hermeneutics take one step further and challenge how Islamic narratives have been constructed and interpreted within strictly homonegative discourses from the beginning, stating that it is this 'unquestionable' authority of the texts that are damaging them in the long run.

While the intensity of homonegativity towards Queer* individuals in many Western societies has reduced considerably because of, in part, laws and policies that prohibit hate speech and hate crimes, the current situation in Turkey and other Muslim-majority countries, where Queer* rights are not legally recognised by the state, and hence hate speech and hate crimes are not penalised justly, are more vehement. Hate speech towards Queers* in Turkey circulates pervasively, not only in daily conversations but in political discussions as well. While the current status of Queer* rights in Turkey negatively affects all gender non-conforming and sexually dissident individuals, the fact that homonegative discourses are systematically enunciated and promoted by the official religious institutions and its official representatives exacerbates the situation for Queer* Muslims in Turkey. As the President of Religious Affairs of Turkey has explicitly stated numerous times in the past, there is no place for Queer* sexualities in Islam (according to their way of understanding what Islam is), arguing that Queer* rights are a 'Western' political cause and a modern 'evil' that the youth and their parents should be wary of (T24, 2018). In such a hostile environment, therefore, I argue that the experiences of Queer* Muslims in Turkey are different from those living in countries where legal systems protect the rights of sexual and religious freedom of the individuals.

As one of the central studies on the topic of 'Queer*-affirmative hermeneutics' (Yip, 2005), Yip's analysis of the existing strategies of Queer* hermeneutics reveals that Queer* Muslims engage in three strategies when confronting heteronormative religious narratives: (i) challenging the traditional hermeneutics of the Quranic verses (the defensive strategy); (ii) problematising the authority and objectivity of religious figures who have performed heteronormative translations and interpretations (the offensive strategy); and/or (iii) engaging in Queer*-affirming translation and reinterpretation, recasting the holy texts and narratives according to sexuality-affirming standards (the creative strategy). In the following pages, I focus on how Queer* Muslims in Turkey experience relationships between their religious and sexual identities in respect to heteronormative hermeneutics, problematising why Queer* Muslims in Turkey engage in defensive and offensive strategies, but not the creative strategy (as far as the interlocutors of this study are concerned). Due to length constraints, the English and Turkish translations of the Quranic verses and

their in-depth translational analyses are not provided here.[10] Similarly, a discussion around the hadith is not provided since the hadith's liability (*isnad*) is intricately complex. (see: Kugle, 2010, and Hendricks, 2016, for in-depth analyses of the issue).

i. Cataclysmically Queer*: challenging the heteronormative Qur'anic narratives

There are five explicit references to male homosexuality in the Qur'an (Nisa: 16; Shuara: 165 & 166; Neml: 55; A'raf: 81), which focus on the story of the Prophet Lot and the 'heinous crimes' of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In his seminal piece, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (2010), Kugle re-examined the story of Lot and wrote that 'focusing only on this [same-sex acts] distorts one's reading of the story. The story is really about infidelity and how the Tribe of Lot schemed for ways to reject his Prophethood and his public standing in their community.' (p. 69). The apocalyptic story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (the names of the cities are mentioned only in the Bible, not in the Qur'an), and how the citizens failed to listen to Lot's words are claimed to be crucial for Turkish people's understanding of homosexuality in relation to the Islamic doctrines, as the story of Lot has been brought up in every interview by the interlocutors themselves within the scope of homosexuality in Islam. Even though the story of the doomed people of Sodom and Gomorrah (or *Lut kavmi* as it is mentioned in Turkey) has been a recurring theme for many interlocutors in this study, the story's influential role on Meltem's memories was remarkably distinct from those of the others:

> *Meltem:* If you are not rich, that is, if your parents are not wealthy old-timer İstanbulians, everyone around here is raised in a conservative manner.
> *İlkan:* Conservative as in how? Could you explain what you mean by that?
> *Meltem:* I mean, plain conservatism… My mum used to make us fast without asking us if we wanted to. We just obeyed. If we didn't pray, she would scold us… You know, they were harsh like many parents. A lot! And not just

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10 Unfortunately, there is no Queer*-affirmative translation of the Qur'an in Turkish at the moment. However, the interested readers are encouraged to look at the original pieces of Muhsin Hendricks (2010) and Scott Siraj al-Kugle (2010), in which they tackle the translation-related issues regarding the Arabic terms in the Qur'an and why translating them into English is problematic and done by confining them to the conventional, contemporary meanings of the terms rather than their meanings at the time. Another useful source on this issue, which references multiple verses, can be found online at this link: https://www.luthercollege.edu/university/academics/impetus/winter-2013-impetus/a-muslim-non-heteronormative-reading-of-the-story-of-lot-liberation-theology-for-lgbtiq-muslims.

towards me, they wanted everyone to live the way they did… For example, if a homosexual were on screen, my mum would immediately knock on wood and say that these were signs of the end times. She would say we should burn these perverts like Lot (phub) did… I wished to disappear in those moments. My own mum would want to see me burn… Later, I learned that the Prophet Lot's story was more complex and different than we were taught.

İlkan: Different how?

Meltem: As I read some English sources, I learned that their biggest sin was not homosexuality. They committed adultery, rape, incest, among many other ugly things. There was an edition of the KaosGL journal on this issue couple of years ago. It wrote that they raped their guests and neighbours. They even wanted to approach the angels who were sent to Lot. Our people, however, were somehow only focused on the homosexuality thing. I am not even sure if it should be included as a sin. (21, Undergraduate Student)

Meltem's words point to a common occurrence in Turkish society regarding the 'accurate' portrayals of the historical/metaphorical incidents that take place in the Qur'an. In this case, her mother mistakenly believes that the Prophet Lot burnt the 'sinners' of Sodom and Gomorrah, though it is unclear how Lot might have burnt these people according to her mother's knowledge. As far as the traditional story goes, the people of Lot (even this framing suggests close ties between the Prophet Lot and the people he lived with in the same city, which is counter-factual) were condemned and destroyed by God because of their homosexual acts (Kligerman, 2007). However, as people refer to this narrative, they usually tend to ignore some aspects in the story that are vital to arrive at a more encompassing reading. Contrary to the Qur'an's emphasis on treating one's guest with great hospitability and respect, people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who were ruled by 'selfish' aristocrats, indulged in numerous 'immoral' crimes, ranging from idolatry (which is one of the greatest sins in Islam) to denying Allah's word, and from engaging in incest, paedophilia, and bestiality to raping their guests, foreigners, and anyone who did not have enough power to resist (Schmit & Sofer, 1992). The frequently referenced 'heinous sin' of Lot's people has generally been evoked concerning the terms *liwat* or *fahisha* in the Qur'an, which have traditionally been translated as the 'ugly/foul deed', even though 'fahisha' refers to many activities that are considered wrong, immoral, indecent, atrocious, and gruesome (Siraj, 2014). Siraj's interpretation (2016, p. 93) argues that the story, even if some of the passages were concerned with homosexuality, the main message was on 'nonreciprocal exploitation of bodies' and that the story was 'an account of condemning rape, not contemporary consensual same-sex relationships' (Music, 2010; Geissinger, 2012,

as cited in Siraj, 2016). Likewise, Kugle contends that the story's message was distorted by the heteronormative selectiveness of the early jurists and translators, stating that 'the Qur'an does not clearly and unambiguously address homosexuals in the Muslim community, as there is no term in the Qur'an corresponding to "homosexual" or "homosexuality"' (2010, p. 70). These arguments, I believe, reflect the discernible power that the homonegative intellectuals and religious authorities possess with their access to the translational sources and the knowledge of the scripture, pointing at the role of translational politics played in the jurists' goals of heteronormative 'culture planning' (Even-Zohar, 1997).

ii. Equivalizing Queer* desire: losing joy, finding terms

For the Arab intellectuals who performed the early translations and interpretations of the Qur'an, Massad argued that they were highly influenced by the Victorian notions of inappropriate sexual behaviours, which they believed to be directly applicable to Arab sexual desires (2007, p. 15). Massad's claim sheds an illuminating light on the 'epistemological violence' (Teo, 2010) caused by the colonialising forces since the majority of the concepts of the post-Victorian sexological studies were not present in the minds of the Middle Eastern people before the 'moral white men' came with their 'mission' and cataloguing sciences. While I am not naively suggesting that there were no individuals with Queer* desires, sexual practices, and non-normative gender identities in the Middle East, I present that the issue of Queer* sexuality was formidably a matter of the private sphere or even when treated as a taboo, free from all the clinically pathologising and moralist discussions around it. Following the Foucauldian analysis of the Western history of sexuality, El-Rouayheb (2005) argued that, notwithstanding the fact that anal intercourse was generally considered to be an immoral act by many jurists and writers, the issue of homosexuality between men was ambiguously approached before the cultural conquest of the Western norms and terms on Queer* sexuality.[11]

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11   Behind the informed positionality and the activist yearnings of this current piece for positive social change lies the premise that 'Muslim stance' on Queer* rights in Turkey is not singular with the recognition that the 'Muslim versus secular' binary that has served the authoritarian and autocratic politics of the current Turkish government (Savcı, 2018, p. 80). I claim that we also need to realise that the lived realities of the believer and non-believer cis-heterosexual Turkish citizens as well as those of the believer and non-believer Queers* in Turkey are different from another. If not diligently tackled and questioned, a binary formation runs the risk of being used against Queer* Muslims, who want to freely practice their beliefs without being scorned or cast the improper other by other Muslims or non-religious Queers* in Turkey.

A similar problem occurs when Islam meets the Western knowledge on Queer* sexualities and genders: the terms 'homosexual' and 'gay', as we understand them in their vernacular, do not have proper Arabic equivalents, since these terms have socio-historical connotations to them, as having emanated in the Western medical/ clinical discourse (Foucault, 1978). Whereas in today's Arabic, *shadhdh jinsi* is generally interpreted as 'homosexuality', the term actually refers to someone who acts in unusual sexual practices, not restricted to sexual practices with same-sexed individuals. Similar to Bereket and Adam's findings (2006), which indicated that sexual practices seemingly have more self-identificatory value in the ways Turkish gay men make sense of their Queer* identities, the contemporary Arabic terminology on Queer* sexual practices and identities are multiple and heterogeneous in terms of their meanings and daily uses, none of which are included in the Qur'an. These cross-cultural problems Western Queer* politics pose for the Queer* individuals in Turkey have been underlined numerous times in the interviews. For instance, one interlocutor remarks on the way the term *lut kavmi* (people of Lot) has been translated and used in daily Turkish with the following words:

> *İlkan:* How do you think of when you hear the words Islam and homosexuality together?
> *Ferit:* Sorrow (*acı*). Rejection. Hell... Well, let me correct myself. This is what I thought before. For years, I have believed that *livata* (liwat) meant homosexuality, and *lut kavmi* (people of Lot) was a bunch of homosexuals. [laughs]. They taught us so. But, it turned out that there were punished after trying to rape the angels sent by Allah. I first heard this, watching a morning show with the late Yaşar Nuri Öztürk. Then I did some research and understood that *livata* could be any sexual thing that was not considered okay at the time. Anything that was not for recreation purposes, you know. Can you imagine?! But I think I need to read more on this. My mind is too muddled about the translation issue. I now wish I continued going to the Qur'an courses; I would like to read it in advanced Arabic.
> *İlkan:* May I ask why you stopped going to the Qur'an courses?
> *Ferit:* Why do you think?! Again and again, the discussions would come to the damning of the people of Lot. I used to have frequent nightmares. Constantly! My parents got furious that I dropped out, but I had to. I was merely a child.

While there are more contemporary terms in Arabic such as *luti* (the active partner who likes to penetrate a boy or man), *mabun* or *ubna* (the passive partner who likes to be penetrated), *dab* (a man who rapes his victims as they sleep), *musahiqa*

(lesbian), and *liwat* (anal sex regardless of genders), Lagrange states that these terms were not present at the time when the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Mohammad (2000, pp. 170–171). In the same vein, Monroe argues that one cannot talk about the presence of homosexuality in the pre-modern Arabic civilisation in the sense that it has been used in the West because there was no differentiation between heterosexuals and homosexuals in the first place. The sexual difference was delineated according to the sexual practices, whether one was the penetrating or the penetrated part in the intercourse (1997, pp. 115–116). In particular, the active partners were generally not considered as 'gay', whereas the passive partners were usually regarded as such due to the act of being penetrated having been associated with effeminacy.

Therefore, in pre-modern Arabic society, homosexuality was not focused on 'identity' (Shakila); instead, it was a matter of bodily practice, who penetrates and who is penetrated. It is probably on these grounds that female homosexuality has never been much of an issue since it was thought to be devoid of penetration (Schmidtke, 1999, p. 43). These translational problems of cultural equivalence are of utmost importance in this study because language is conceived to be both a cultural and an ideological entity, 'always already produc[ing] an array of new codifications, textualities, and cultural meanings, as well as deterritorializations and reterritorializations of social and discursive systems' (De Toro, 2009, p. 80, as cited in Spurlin, 2017, p. 173). For that matter, it can be realised the conditions in which translations and interpretations of the pertinent Qur'anic verses and narratives have been conducted within the heteronormative worldviews and discourses. In line with Yip's modes of challenging traditional hermeneutics, only one of the interviewees engaged in an 'offensive' approach, through which he challenged the authority of religious figures and structure. However, his critiques were also directed at the political figures whose underlined words have influential power over the masses. The following excerpt is illuminating on the impact of the religious and political authorities on Queer* Muslims in Turkey:

> *İlkan:* Concerning your relationship with Islam, have there been other influential figures besides your parents?
> *Tarık:* Of course, there have been! I used to follow some of the famous *hoca*s that everyone likes, Nihat Hatipoğlu and Mustafa Karataş,[12] for instance. But then I saw that they said that homosexuality was a sin and a disease. As if it can be cured! I don't believe that. Allah created me this way. Anyone

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12   Nihat Hatipoğlu and Mustafa Karataş are two famous Turkish academics of Islamic Studies and theologians who frequently talk about Islamic issues in Turkish TV programs. Their ideas are classically orthodox in general.

who claims the opposite would contradict Allah's strong will and judgment…
But the culprit is JDP. It's like they are obsessed with us! They keep targeting
us. I no longer go to the mosque because of these people. If they are Muslims,
I am not! At least not like them. Such a pity!

As Tarık's words indicate, the homonegative ideas and discourses of the in-
fluential political figures on Queer* sexuality negatively affect Queer* Muslims
and their relationship with religion to a considerable extent. As he explained, it is
Tarık's anger towards JDP leaders' attitudes towards Queers* that caused him to
stop going to the mosque or supporting JDP in the first place. While he stated that
he voted for JDP in the early days, he now regrets his actions and claims that such
public expressions of intolerance and hatred have no place in Islam, which, as he
calls it, is 'a religion of peace and togetherness'. Even though he does not employ
any 'defensive' modes of challenging traditional hermeneutics (he does not want
to 'misinterpret or read into Allah's words'), his 'offensive' approach takes a sig-
nificant portion of responsibility from the shoulders of the Queer* Muslims and
mount it on the politicians and the theologians who, in his words, 'manipulate
society's ideas and attitudes towards' Queers* in Turkey. It is interesting that
none of the interviewees employed the 'creative' modes of challenging traditional
hermeneutics, in that they did not imply or mention any 'possible' account of
same-sex intimacy and love in the Qur'an (outing the text) or did not inject Queer*
meanings into the narratives and figures (befriending the text) (Yip, 2005). In the
final section, I hypothesise why such differences in hermeneutic strategies might
exist and what sorts of democratic strategies and liberties may be necessary in
Turkey's case for the 'creative' modes of Queer* hermeneutics to emerge.

IV. Concluding remarks: believing and desiring Queerly* in Turkey

Ostracising claims that posit non-cisheteronormative genders and sexualities are
not accepted in Islam have several detrimental effects on the lives of Queer* Mus-
lims, as my interlocutors' experiences above reveal. The majority of Queer* Mus-
lims that are trying to reconcile the conflicting aspects of their religious and sexual/
gender identities end up experiencing numerous difficulties in their relationship
with their self-concept, their family relationships, friends, partners, and colleagues,
which are found to be creating further problems of belonging both in the Queer*
scenes and Islamic communities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011;
Jaspal, 2017). Yet, most of these studies do not focus on the salience of the Qur'an-
ic narratives and the Qur'anic verses on the affective states and the memories of
the Queer* Muslims they study. On the other hand, this study presents a different

case than the countries studied in the literature so far.[13] Religious authorities do not always have the same amount of extensive social influence, and the salience of the collective religious identity is not the same everywhere (Altınordu, 2010, p. 541). For Queer* Muslims in Turkey, religious identity cannot easily remain in the background because religious discourse is ubiquitous in the course of the daily lives of Turkish citizens. Not only is religion more apparent in the public sphere, but it has political connotations as well. Any religious statement or claim that might contradict the ideas and judgments of the central political party might easily be labelled as blasphemous and, even worse, legally punished, as we have seen in the art exhibition incident at Boğaziçi University.

While there is a rapidly growing movement of 'Progressive Muslims' across the world, which aim to develop alternative Islamic theologies on Queer* desires, genders, and sexualities that utilise various modes of nonheteronormative translational practices, reinterpretation, and Queer* hermeneutics, there are only a few individuals in Turkey who engage in these modes of Queer* translational hermeneutics of Islam due to the problems of having the necessary social, cultural, and intellectual resources to do so. As the intricate relationships of my interlocutors with their religious and sexual identities have shown, there are multiple, grave problems involved in the question of how to approach Islam queerly in Turkey's case: not only the issues of how to read, understand, and promote the alternative Queer* hermeneutic traditions like the *ijtihadic* tradition Hendricks proposed (2016) when there are no Turkish resources, groups, and figures to turn to, but also the very possible realities of being legally accused of disrespecting the religious values of Turkish society if one attempts to promote these ideas publicly. In this respect, I argue that it is the apparent lack of legal protection of the religious liberties of individuals in Turkey to freely 'profess, practice and propagate religion' (Bhargava, 2010) that causes Queer* Muslim in Turkey not to invest in the 'creative' modes of alternative hermeneutics that Queer* Muslim living in Western societies can. The state's tendency to ignore how religious communities act within themselves stems from 'assertive secularism' of the Turkish Republic, which demands a strict wall of separation between state and religion (Kuru, 2007,

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13   Even though this is the first study in Turkey to examine and analyse ways in which Muslim LGBTQIA+ people in Turkey experience their intersecting religious/spiritual and sexual/ gender identities with a focus on traditional and/or non-heteronormative translational hermeneutical strategies, there have been influential publications regarding Queer Muslim lives in Turkey that deserve to be read in their own right to be rightfully cherished for their innovative insights and styles (Bereket & Adam, 2008; Keniş, 2012; Ayten & Anık, 2014, Yıldırım, 2018; and most notably, Kuyumcu, 2020).

p. 527), and thereby leaving religious minorities (in this case, Queer* Muslims) vulnerable before the dominant religious groups. Whereas it is acknowledged that it is not easy to establish a medium that will protect Queer* Muslims from the homonegative Muslim groups due to the 'ideological path dependence' present in the country's political history, I think future studies in political sciences and religious studies may benefit from thinking through Bhargava's concepts and ideas pertinent to 'contextual secularism' and 'principled distance', so that Muslim sexual minorities and their religious liberties and equal citizenship rights might be protected against the groups that might want to harm Queer* Muslims on the ground of desacralising 'their' values.

In conclusion, even in the case of Queers* individuals, who have been systemically condoned and discriminated against by the orthodox institutions and authorities of Abrahamic religions since the Middle Ages, religion and spirituality still continue to play indispensable roles in the daily trajectories of their gendered and sexualised experiences (especially in countries like Turkey in which politics, religion, and everyday life of citizens are irrevocably interwoven), the lived realities and experiences of Queer* Muslims, and the questions this study raises are exceptionally relevant for our contemporary discussions around the relationship between religion and gender/sexuality politics. Not only are the stakes high for the Queer* individuals everywhere who would like to enrich and empower their religious experiences without feeling the need to hide or reject their sexual/gender identities or giving upon their religious and spiritual needs as if these two options are bound in an ultimatum, but there is the immediate necessity of attending to the rapidly growing problem of pervasive Islamophobia in the West that is centred on the misapprehension that Islam is inherently hostile against Queer* individuals. Just as Mohamed and Esack have argued (2011), the 'burden' of shared responsibility falls on both sides of the debate, namely Muslims who need to sort out their vexed relationship with sexual diversity and gender equality, engaging more closely with the contemporary understanding of Queer* sexuality, and the Western LGBTQ+ organisations and activists who need to stop reproducing Islamophobic discourses to vilify Muslims and Islam even when Queer* rights are exploited and disparaged by the Muslim institutions and authorities in the Middle-Eastern countries as in this complex case I have demonstrated here. Ultimately, it should be realised that the ongoing intolerance and negativity towards Queers* and other marginalised groups are to be contextualised within the socio-historical and politico-cultural embeddedness of Islamic societies, since from the non-ideological, theological point of view, the Qur'anic verses and stories on love, acceptance, tolerance, social justice, embracing and celebrating 'unity in diversity' outnumber the five verses on same-sex practices and the story of Lot.

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