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The Formation of Religious Identity and Practice among
American Muslim College Students

by

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INTRODUCTION

On the Australian comedy show, *Salam Café*, Sri Lankan-Australian comedian Nazeem Hussein plays "Uncle Sam," a hyper-stereotyped Muslim, who speaks with an exaggerated foreign accent, dons a skull cap and white socks with flip flops and proclaims that he wants to run for mayor of Camden, a city he would transform into Australia's first Islamic state. In a sketch, which mimics a talk show, Uncle Sam enters wearing an Australian flag as a cape. When asked by the white talk show host why he wears the flag, Uncle Sam replies, "Because sometimes people just don't think you are an Australian citizen, so you have to prove it by wearing an Australian flag and carrying your passport." The line and Hussein's Uncle Sam caricature, the hyper patriotic foreigner, are jabs at the struggle that Muslims face as they fight against being seen as terrorists and foreigners in Australia. They are warnings about the dangers of importing extreme stereotypes on the scale of iconic American ones—a scale that makes them dangerously contagious. On this level, "Uncle Sam" seeks to neutralize an imported incendiary device for igniting local racialized histories, but the effect doesn't stop there. Stereotypes feed stereotypes. Any local expression of Islamophobia feeds back through new media and cosmopolitan travel channels into social sites across the global, whatever the scale.

Salam Café has been on air on Australian television since 2005 and features many skits that exaggerate mainstream images of Muslims as violent, oppressed and strange in the public sphere. Other heavily circulated skits include, "Working with a Muslim," which highlights strange practices that Muslims may perform in the workplace such as making *wudu* in the bathroom, the Islamic ritual washing of the hands and feet, or "Extremist Makeover" in which a crew of experts works to disguise a top notch terrorist as an ordinary and innocent civilian.

Despite the thousands of miles between the United States and Australia, American Muslim students I worked with recommended I watch this show via YouTube. They have circulated the video among their friends, accepting the video as humorous because they identify with the same struggles and discourses that are poked fun at in the show. "We have a lot of Muslim humor, but a lot of the jokes you'd only understand if you were Muslim," Kamal, one of my primary informants for this project, remarked to me during one of our first meetings.

As a non-Muslim entering the world of American Muslims, I was at first wary that I would not be able to attain an understanding of their perspectives. However, through the course of my research I realized that my own anxieties stemmed from the idea that these students were shaped by a discrete religious identity. This initial anxiety was alleviated as I realized throughout my research that the students did not live in isolation, bounded by

a strict adherence to *shar'ia* law and ignorant of mainstream American life–indeed far from it. They were aware of the diversity of lifestyle choices, religious affiliations, and political currents that they navigated their lives in as well as conscious of the representations and scrutiny that their lives faced in the public sphere. This project is an attempt to map how young American Muslims form their religious practice and identity amongst so-called Western philosophies, discourses and media at their disposal in the U.S. and global public spheres.

The *Salam Café* vignette exemplifies the complexity that American Muslims operate within, as they are simultaneously consumers of mass media, students at American universities, and world travelers just as much as they are Muslims. The humor on Salam Café is dependent on understandings of two subject positions: the first is the "white" or non-Muslim perspective, which fears Muslims because of their foreign-ness, and the second is the perspective of a Muslim who is subject to this representation. In skits such as "Extremist Makeover" and "Working With a Muslim," Muslims point to the ridiculous-ness of such representation by depicting themselves as terrorists and suspicious foreigners.

Of course, because Salam Café is written, produced, and performed by Muslims, the show is able to avoid racist undertones, which would underlie it if it were to be produced by whites. In addition, the production says something about Australian culture, as no such show has been produced in the United

States.[1] However, there is an audience for the show within U.S. borders and many American Muslims find the show funny because despite the vast distances, they are exposed to similar discourses and experiences. The production of the show is an assertion of power against these mainstream attitudes and views. As the producers appropriate the tone and discourse of mainstream and white dominated American shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, the producers demonstrate the irony of the whole scene: that contemporary western Muslims are far from being ignorant foreigners in western contexts, but rather masters at bringing their Islamic faith into so-called western forms and cultural modes.

I utilize the Salam Café vignette to illustrate just one of the many ways that American Muslims are forming their identities in the midst of secular and western environments. This research paper explores this complex interaction that has become the norm of Muslim practice in an age of mass movement, media and multicultural environments. Though from its earliest origins Islam has been a religion spread across geographical space conditioned by technology, political boundaries and culture, contemporary technologies and the movement of Muslims into secular democratic Western spaces present new challenges and contexts for Islam to be interpreted.

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[1] Muslim humor produced by Muslims as standup comedy is another matter and material for cross cultural comparison, as Emma Tarlo reveals in Visibly Muslim (2010), her study of urban Muslim women's political identity expressions in the United Kingdom

Many social scientists have recently latched onto studying the subject of "Muslims in the West" as a response to the politicized portrayals of the Muslim identity that came to dominate western media over the past decade. Though the term "Islamophobia" first appeared in print as early as 1991 when *Insight* Magazine published it to describe Russian activities in Afghanistan, popular usage of the term began after the World Trade Center attacks on September 11 in 2001. News outlets such as Fox News began investigating organized terrorism among Muslim American communities, tracing funding of mosques and travel to Saudi Arabia. New coverage created a link between imagery of violence in the Middle East, suicide bombers, and fascist governments with Islam. This surge of negative media created a link between an entire religion with extremism and suspicion and posited Muslims as the new "Other" to be feared.

In June of 2009, President Obama delivered a speech titled, "A New Beginning," in Cairo, Egypt as a response to the scrutiny stressed on the Muslim identity. Obama's speech was meant to be a message of peace to the Arab and Muslim worlds, affirming America's acceptance of Muslims and reflecting a hope of cultural and religious pluralism in both international relations as well as in domestic ones.

> I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles - principles of justice and

progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings." (Office of the Secretary 2009)

Despite attempts to persuade westerners of a compatibility with Islam, the politicization of the Muslim identity and fear of extremism still comes to surface in particular moments and spaces of tension. The 2010 Park51 controversies in New York, the violent protests against a Muslim community attempting to build an Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and threats of Qur'an burning by Florida pastor Jerry Jones demonstrate that a dislike, uncomfortability and ignorance of Islam is still a reality among many Americans almost ten years after the tragic attacks.

Obama's noble attempts to instill rhetorics of peace and tolerance still reduce Islam and the West to bounded entities. Such oversimplification cannot provide a solution because it pushes audiences away from understanding Muslims as humans and makers of complex identities. This thesis, along with all anthropological studies, is made in order to expand upon this complexity or to expose my subjects' "normalness without reducing their particularity." (Geertz 1973:14) The first step in this endeavor is to expand upon the shallow history and simplifications that pigeonhole a diverse and burgeoning community.

A Short History of Muslims in the U.S.

The earliest immigration of Muslims can be traced to 1501, where as many as 40,000 African Muslims primarily from Senegal were brought across the Atlantic as part of the slave trade (Austin 2002). Following the Civil War, small Muslim groups immigrated to the U.S. from Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Immigration from these countries continued until the U.S. halted immigration in 1924. Over the next 40 years, Muslims from Soviet-bloc countries seeking refuge from the conflicts of World War II made up the majority of the U.S. Muslim migration. The 1965 immigration law initiated the third and largest wave of Muslim immigration, bringing immigrants from South Asia and Arabic countries. This wave continues today with the largest immigration over the last decade hailing from Pakistan, followed by Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt (U.S. Census 2000).

In addition to the population of immigrants, there are a significant number of Black Muslims who converted under the Nation of Islam movement founded by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in Detroit, Michigan in 1930. W. Fard Muhammad who expanded upon Islam's original doctrines and claimed that he was Allah reincarnated, gained many followers throughout the 40's and 50's. The famous activist Malcom X was also originally a part of the NOI movement until1964, when he led many followers in a movement back towards Sunni Islam. In 1975, Warith Deen Mohammed or W.D. (Wallace) Muhammad took over as Supreme Minister of the Nation of Islam and

renamed the organization "The World Community of Al-Islam in the West" which later became the American Society of Muslims. Wallace reformed the organization and doctrines to accept whites as fellow worshipers and advocated a return towards Sunni Islam.

These strands of history compose a diverse Muslim population in the United States, which now consists of a mix of recent immigrants from Arab, African and South Asian countries, "ethnic" Americans with familial descent from South Asian and Arabic countries, African Americans who converted in the Nation of Islam, and recent converts which include Latinos and whites. According to a 2010 poll, Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group in the United States with 28 percent white, 35 percent African American, 18 percent Asian, and 18 percent other (Gallup Poll 2008). Such numbers reflect the diversity of backgrounds, which form American Islam. Part of this thesis explores those interrelations between these ethnic groups.

In this thesis, I describe some of the venues and ways that contemporary American Muslims negotiate their practices and identities in conversation with western cultural modes, media and ideas. I purposely do not use the term, "Muslims in the West," which has been used often in anthropological literature, in order to move away from the emphasis that such a term places on a foreign-ness or displacement, as if Muslims are not "at home" in the West. This project instead highlights how *Western Muslims* are very much at home in the west, as they negotiate their identities and practice

within western discourses, utilize new media, represent themselves and communicate with outside groups in multicultural or supposedly "secular" environments. Throughout my work, I have encountered a wide diversity of Muslims who regard themselves as a part of American Islam. The combination of their negotiations with media, networks and community are the essential new characteristics of their religious practice – a blend of the historically constructed Islamic traditional practice and modes with modern "western" or "secular" media and culture.

<u>Chapter Overview</u>

In the first chapter I introduce the setting of the college environment. Limited by the restraints of time and resources of conducting research as an undergraduate, my research focuses on the transformations of young Muslims in the college environments of the Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts. This limitation proved to be in many ways a fruitful strength of my research as it simultaneously limited the scope of my project while also providing a window into the wide spectrum of practices and productively unsettled identities within American Islam. The setting provided a common discourse of choice, an underlying theme in the following chapters, which look at the construction of self through three types of engagements.

The following three chapters each explore different facets of life and engagements through which my informants' construct their individual and

collective identities. Drawing on Dorinne Kondo's theoretical assertion from her ethnography among workers in Japan that the self is an ongoing and continuous process constructed in the arenas of company and family (1990:9), I argue that American Muslim college students construct themselves through their engagement with religious knowledge, consumption and production of presentations made in the public sphere, and through the labels and boundaries they draw within their own communities. These thematic arenas became apparent as I became more immersed in my informants' daily lives and I have thus grouped together the multiple and complex layers of their individual stories into these overarching themes in order to construct a more organized picture of these multiple sites of identity formation.

The first of these thematic chapters is titled *Knowledge*. This chapter illustrates that the ways of "knowing" Allah are intertwined with new technology and an individualist mentality. There has been an abundance of literature, which explores the relationship between new media and Islam. Such literature has problematized the idea that media and secularization go hand in hand, emphasizing the power that media can have in religious domains including changing psychological conceptions of the self and maintaining religious piety through media consumption (Abu-Lughod 2006; Hirshkind 2001).

The students I worked with were enrolled as undergraduates and thus in many ways framed their lives as a pursuit of knowledge. However, in their

narratives they often remarked that their engagement with religious

knowledge through new media and technologies was of particular importance

in shaping their religious identity. Drawing on literature by Anderson and

Eickelman who have argued that the relocation of Islam through new

mediums and technologies have fostered new philosophies of interpretation

and reconstituted the imagination of Islam in secular and multicultural space, I

argue that the practice of engaging with religious knowledge emphasizes the

self and thus informs an individualist view of religion. My research

emphasizes how portable and creative forms such as YouTube videos and

iPhone applications have made central traditional sources of Islam, the Qur'an

and Hadith, more accessible and thus allowed individuals to inherit a new role

of interpretation and construction that was once designated solely to elite

scholars.

      In addition, I highlight how some Muslims have appropriated secular

and non-Islamic religious or spiritual activities into an Islamic domain. These

examples of new religious practice show how American Muslims have

developed techniques for acquiring and forming their own individual Islam(s)

to maintain their faith in secular spaces. I also explore the conversion

narratives of several converts and how their use of religious media facilitated

their own transformation into a Muslim identity. This chapter draws on

theoretical frameworks as established by Brigit Meyer whose study of

Charismatic Christians argued that anthropology should "investigate the

critical role electronic media play in the imagination" and the "new links between people and the emergence of fresh arenas of debate" which arise out of such settings (Meyer and Moors 2006:3).

In the third chapter, *Presentations*, I explore the presentations that Muslims have felt compelled to make in order to form a voice for a moderate Islam amongst the negative representations that dominate the media and thus place a true Islam on the plane of acceptable religions in the American imaginary. These presentations are made on both local and global scales and take the forms of creative media such as film or music as well as community discussions in order to form relationships with non-Muslims and take back an American Muslim identity, they often described as being "hijacked" on September 11th. I analyze the career of Salman Ahmad, a Pakistani-American Sufi-rock star, who is part of a greater group of popular Muslim figures working to construct a humanist and neatly packaged Islam. Such work can be seen as part of what Jessica Winegar has characterized as the humanity game, a trend in which art marketed under humanist and universalist ideals actually perpetuate established Orientalist divisions and frameworks (Winegar 2008).

I also analyze the recent independent film *Bilal's Stand*, which is currently being used as a tool for discussion on the diversity of ways to be Muslim on college campuses across the United States. The film is written, directed and acted by American Muslims and portrays the life of a Black Muslim high school teenager growing up in Detroit. The film acts as a way to

assert their Muslim identity in contestation to more popular images, which pigeonhole Muslims as foreigners and Arabs. The utilization of filmmaking and music in identity claims is related to what Faye Ginsburg has called "cultural activism" in her study of indigenous media production (2002:40).

In addition, I examine how my own informants have been inspired by these larger scale presentations and have appointed themselves as spokespeople for Islam in their own communities and college campuses. I analyze the way that Islam is packaged at cultural events such as Eid Dinners which could be interpreted as cultural exhibitions meant to legitimate an American Muslim identity, similar to the way that Jewish producers have attempted to legitimate their identity through cultural displays (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

I also analyze the movement in the United States towards inter-faith dialogues comparable to other social movements such as the civil and women's right movements. Within this movement groups create acceptable and neatly packaged forms of Islam and find ways to bond over "universals" with the intention of creating a market of acceptable religions in the American imaginary. I examine the weekly meetings that the UMass Amherst MSA has organized with a local intervarsity Christian group, arguing that in such discussions the Muslim students try to understand Christian concepts through the lens of their Islamic perspectives and vice versa. These events require effort on both sides and reflect a greater trend of packaging religion to be used

and delivered in a multicultural environment. I argue that this type of packaging is a distinctly American practice, as participants adhere to philosophies of cultural and religious pluralism and work towards finding commonalities in their religions, erasing over historical inconsistencies and disagreements.

The fourth chapter *Boundaries,* problematizes the trends described in the first, which may paint a picture of a harmonious conflict-free Muslim environment, by describing the sorts of boundaries that Muslims draw within their own communities. This includes the maintenance of boundary lines between ethnic groups, national identities and the labels, which classify varying degrees of religiousness between conservatism and liberalism amongst American Muslims. I also explore the Progressive Muslims movement. The movement formed by mostly converted Muslims in the early 90's, is rejected in the domain of more mainstream and conservative Islam and members are often seen posited as inauthentic Muslims. The members of this movement fight for a re-interpretation of the Qur'an in light of cultural changes since its first revelation, highlighting the ability of Islam to fit within frameworks of other social movements such as feminism and gay rights. The experiences of these Progressive Muslims demonstrate how intertwined the Muslim identity is with racial and ethnic identities, as they face discrimination from more conservative and "ethnic" Muslim communities. The boundaries in

this chapter are not meant to put Muslims into boxes, but rather to describe the complex arena in which American Muslim identity is negotiated.

The stories I gather in my project are of course incomplete but represent the complexity and diversity in which American Muslims are operating, in hopes of providing a more nuanced picture of American Muslim life, and the future of religious life in America more generally.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In the 1960s, sociologists of religion interpreted declining church attendance as part of a larger cultural process they termed secularization in which rational thought and allegiance to the state would take over allegiances to and belief in God. Those theories were retracted in later years as the evidence pointed to a persistent population, which engaged in religious practice (Berger 1960). In their revisions of their secularist theories, scholars argued that instead of secularization, society reflected a changing *religiosity* – what Talal Asad termed the 'religious turn' in modernity (2003) which entailed the de-institutionalization of religious practices towards more individualistic ones (Roy 2004). The market of religious practices and movements of people across space into democratic and secular spaces have altered once strictly singular identities as Muslims. This research project does not take "Islam" as its subject but focuses on how practitioners imagine and practice Islam, drawing on literature which explores new forms of belonging

which complicate nationalist identities and well as problematizes the dichotomy between religious and secular spaces, western and eastern tradition.

Islam has been studied by a diversity of scholars. From historians, sociologists, to Islamic scholars themselves, scholars have focused on studying a particular aspect of Islam. The value of studying Islam through the lens of cultural anthropology is the ability to traverse traditional disciplinary lines, which separate ethnographic work from analysis of historical and text based documents. In my study I utilize both ethnographic work as well as engagement with the texts and media that my subjects consume. I try to attain a holistic understanding of my subjects by analyzing their engagements at the community level, with the religious materials themselves, and how their engagement fits in the contemporary moment in a plural society in the U.S. and Islamic history more broadly. I take Islam to be the inspiration and organizing system, which informs my subjects' realities. I analyze the way they describe their practices and the labels they use in determining what is Islamic under the assumption that what constitutes religion is personally constructed within a social context.

My research is inspired by trends articulated by Olivier Roy, who has called for research that explores how Islam has been deterritorialized from its Middle Eastern roots. Roy argues that Islam has undergone distinct changes in its movement across time, space and now virtual space. Such movement has

displaced the power of the institution and placed a higher emphasis and

agency on the individual. Roy asserts that the study of the Qur'an is thus

inefficient in understanding the interpretations and practices stemmed from

Islamic thought in contemporary times and instead insists on actor-focused

research which focuses on the construction of individualistic faith or what he

defines as *religiosity*, the "self-formulation and self expression of a personal

faith" over religion as a set of beliefs and dogmas (2004:10).

For Roy, the subject of study is not so much "Islam as a theological

corpus, but as the discourses and practices of Muslims" (2004:10). My project

hopes to take Roy's theoretical suggestion in examining the discourses,

identity formations and practices of young American Muslims. I am also

inspired by anthropological literature, which looks at the formation of the self

through ethnographic methods. Dorinne Kondo's seminal ethnography of

Japanese workers, *Crafting Selves*, emphasized the continuous production and

reproduction of self in the arenas of company and family (1990:9). Though

American Muslims are immersed in a much different site of discourses and

practices, they are similar to Japanese workers in their agency in producing

identity among a plethora of sources. In the college environment American

Muslims navigate amongst the backdrop of other religious groups amd

students. As Kondo wrote, "conceptions of the self are intrinsically linked to

power then, as these elite or dominant groups derive their preeminence from

exclusion and hierarchy." (1990:44) These negotiations of self are made

amongst structures of authority. Exclusions and hierarchy became evident throughout my research, as informants' narratives responded to in the public sphere and their individual experiences.

To gain this holistic picture of the negotiations of American Muslims I conducted participant-observation among several Muslim groups in the Pioneer Valley. The primary groups for observation were the Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) at University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass), Amherst, Smith, and Mount Holyoke Colleges, as well as a Progressive Muslim group and Muslims who do not participate in any formal Islamic organization.

My entrance into these communities for my research mirrored the entrance of any new member into their organizations. I contacted the groups about my research and was invited to join their e-mail lists, Facebook groups, and attend in person events. Over the course of two semesters, I attended and participated in events just as any other member would. Events included inter-faith dialogues, *halaqahs* (Islamic issue based discussion circles), social events, and meetings. From my experience, I was immersed in the discussions they had, their goals for their organizations and the intricacies of their group dynamics. As a fellow college student, I held an advantageous position, which allowed me to enter easily into their organizations and relate to the students in many capacities. As a non-Muslim, I was often asked about my own interest in Islam and after knowing them for months after formal interviews, I believe

my informants interpreted my work and curiosity with their lives as an act of good will and peace. They saw my thesis as furthering their own goals and as part of the framework and mindset set forth by the movement of interfaith dialogue, which permeates discussions and activities at many American college campuses that I discuss in Chapter 3.

In addition to observing the community at the networked group level, I conducted 15 'on the ground' interviews, which fleshed out insight into individuals' negotiations with Islam in subjects' personal lives.[2] I often asked questions regarding their family histories, education, migration, religious backgrounds, career interests, and reasons for joining or not joining Muslim organizations. The majority of my subjects are second generation American Muslims but my group also included converts and international students and is thus meant to represent the diversity of experiences that make up American Islam.

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[2] In order to protect their privacy, I have created pseudonyms for my informants.

Chapter 1: Community

The setting of the college environment arose out of issues of accessibility. In my initial plans of research I had planned on studying the networks and dynamics from observing the services and activities at a local mosque, however it became clear to me early on, that my position as a young researcher worked against my favor in such a setting. However, I realized as a college student I possessed a unique access to Muslim students on local campuses. When I began my search for Muslims in the Five College area in early September browsing through their established networks on the Internet, I found the Five College Muslims Facebook group. The group had 152 members who used the group to keep in touch and post announcements for events of interest in the New England area. After e-mailing the contact from the group, my email was disseminated to the leaders of the communities at the Five Colleges and I received three responses within the hour and thus began my journey into Muslim student life.

The research site proved to be a rich setting for observation and analysis, as the college environment was not only a lively nexus of exchange and negotiations between a diverse set of Muslims but it also represented a time when they shared new choices and a heightened pressure to form a better

idea of one's self. I began to see that the new norms for engagement with Islam could be no more evident than in the site of the contemporary American college environment, as students I worked with were both diverse but shared a commonality in their transition into a new space and phase of their lives. As the first time away from the confines and traditions imposed upon them in their parents' homes, Muslim students must construct a new "home" and religious identity in their new environment.

In mainstream discourse, the American college environment is often depicted as scenes of frat parties and sexual liberation. Even in Michael Moffatt's 1989 ethnography *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture,* Moffatt concluded that dorm life was a nexus of sexual experimentation, drugs, and alcohol (Moffatt 1989). However these monolithic portrayals of the "college experience" obviously cannot account for students who choose not to partake in the "mainstream" activities that dominate public ideas of what college life is like. For many Muslim students, engagement in promiscuous activities and consumption of alcohol is off limits or *haram*, the Arabic word for forbidden. Even for students who chose to partake in such activity, as I discuss in *Boundaries*, lived with the conscious choice that their actions were against a mainstream Muslim ideology. Thus, the college environment was full of choices and a remapping of one's religious history into a new space. Through this chapter and the next, I explore the stories of Muslims who describe themselves as becoming more religious

in the college environment through two ways: their involvement in community and their agentive engagement with Islamic knowledge.

For many of the students I worked with, the center of religious life during their childhoods were either the family and/or a *masjid* they attended. Muslim families often make sure their children are involved in their local mosques and thus Islamic Centers in the United States become a central site of identity formation, with their daily religious services, Sunday schools, Girl scouts, dating services and other social events. Many of my informants remarked that they had learned the tenets of their religious beliefs from these sources and maintained their identity through attending Sunday schools, praying with family and associating with other Muslims they knew in their community. This association and situation is put into flux when an American Muslim leaves home and comes into the college environment.

For the first time, there is a choice and need to redefine one's religious identity in the context of a multicultural and secular environment. Many of the narratives I encountered started with the day they joined their campuses' student organization. The quest for identity becomes thrust upon students when they arrive on campus, as they navigate between a plethora of students organizations based on religion, ethnic groups, sexual orientations, political groups and more, they must make choices about what organizations to join. Some Muslim students choose not to associate with these formal groups (I expand upon this in Chapter 4), but others find comfort in the community. In

this chapter I explore how students' participation in a formal community becomes a conscious choice and thus an essential aspect in the formation of a Muslim identity. Below I discuss the history and development of Muslim Student Associations and then move on to discuss some narratives of Muslims for whom their involvement with the community represented a significant and integral role in their Muslim identity. For some the change is simply a reconstitution of the community they experienced as a child and for others the transition represents a drastic change as we see in the reversion narrative of Hana' and narratives of converts.

The Muslim Student Association

The trend of establishing formalized organization meant to support religious identities on secular campuses dates back to the origins of secular institutions. The movement toward Catholic student ministry groups meant to support a Catholic identity and faith later renamed Newman Associations was originally started by John Henry Newman in 1949. No doubt the birth of this formalized group quickly became a model for other groups to do the same. The concept of a Muslim Student Association was born in January of 1963 when Muslim students from small campus organizations met at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to discuss a national formalized organization. These students were mainly immigrants who had moved to the U.S. to acquire an education bonded over their similar struggles of being Muslim and

international students. The representatives discussed creating a network between the informal organizations at their respective schools, which would create an even larger support for the Islamic identities of Muslim students at American universities. From this first conference, the organizers established the Muslim Student Association of the United States and Canada, which later became more commonly referred to as MSA-National.

The organization exists today as an umbrella organization for the 150 MSAs, which exist on college campuses in the U.S. and Canada. MSA-National serves primarily as a secondary resource for students, appointing representatives to serve as advisors to regions in the U.S. they call zones, however local chapter are very much at the hands of the students. Local MSA chapters must be started by students on individual campuses under the procedures of their respective administrations. Students are in charge of developing their own constitutions, student boards, and maintaining their activities. The MSAs may have a chaplain or representative hired by the university to help the organization, but the events produced are primarily student run.

The organizations are primarily funded through budgets designated by students programs or campus religious offices. In the contemporary U.S., the funding and maintenance of religious life is valued on college campuses, perhaps a value instilled since the civil rights movement and the movement towards co-ed education, which coincide with polls that have found that

Americans value diversity on college campuses (Ford Foundation's Campus Diversity Initiative Poll 1998). Many institutions use their diversity of religious groups as a point in their marketing strategies. These values of diversity are an important aspect of the Muslim student participation within the MSA. In this way the function of MSAs has a dual role: 1) they help their students maintain an Islamic identity and lifestyle in the face of a diverse environment as well as 2) help their students to become spokespeople and leaders among the wider diverse community.

Though in the early beginnings MSAs were meant to be support networks for foreign students, the demographic compositions of these groups differ greatly today. The majority of members on the Five College Campuses reflect the diversity of Muslims in America, and thus consist primarily of American-born Muslims, followed by a smaller number of international students and even smaller number of converts. Many of the students, which is common among the broader demographics of the Five Colleges, hailed from towns in New England, but some were from other parts of the U.S. and some were also international students from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Senegal. I discuss the tendency for American Muslims to be attracted to MSA's over international students in *Boundaries*.

The primary activities of the MSAs I have worked with included prayer groups, informal dinners, charitable programs and fundraisers such as Fast-A-Thons which raise funds during Ramadan from the money which

would be spent on participants' food, educational events such as Islamic Awareness Week and other social events. When I interviewed members of the organizations they remarked that their involvement was central to maintaining their faith. Students often joined the MSA as soon as they arrived on campus as freshman and developed connections with fellow members that last throughout the four years they spend there.

Kamal, a Pakistani and senior at UMass described his childhood growing up in Framingham, Massachusetts as multicultural. "I attended public school and there were a lot of different races—Brazilians, Caucasians, Asians, you name it." Kamal says he is friends with people of different religious backgrounds but as a Muslim, he has a great need for Muslim friends and wanted to join the Muslim community as soon as he arrived at UMass. "There's a need to be part of a community in Islam, an importance of brotherhood and sisterhood, it makes practicing faith easier," Kamal expressed.

For some students whose families were active in the *masjid* (another word for mosque) in their childhood, it seemed only natural to seek out a formal Islamic community in college. "My family was always very involved in our masjid back home, we went there on weekends, helped out with fundraisers—I missed that community when I came to college." Samira, who had grown up in New Jersey said.

Hamza, a Muslim convert, expressed that while the UMass MSA is a formal group who organizes activities for the school, it is an informal group of friends who rely on one another for support in maintaining their faith.

> There was a rally outside of the Student Union for Palestine or something, and I realized that a lot of the students were Muslims. So I met some of them that way. I emailed the MSA that I was interested in joining and I realized it was super informal. You just show up. I met Kamal and talked to them. They were playing some board games. I didn't have a beard and I dressed scrubby back then. Kamal would ask me to hang out and I felt self-conscious because I didn't know how to pray. They had that group, but Kamal is the type of person to get people involved. I had heard about them being really cliquey. I didn't become part of the group till last year. I met Karima and Ibrahim and Jamal at the Rally. It really wasn't until last year that I was really integrated within the group.

Now Hamza attends all the MSA weekly events and calls the other members of the community his best friends. "There's nothing wrong with having non Muslim friends. I have a lot, one of my best friends from college isn't Muslim, but some of my best friends are and it's nice because they practice and believe the same thing as I do. It's just easier sometimes."

Rachel, a 24 year old white convert who had moved from California to attend graduate school in New Hampshire expressed that she decided to live in the Pioneer Valley because she had found the Muslim community accepting. "I go to school in New Hampshire, but I found the Muslim communities at the Five Colleges and the Pioneer Valley were so inviting so I decided to still live here." Rachel does not live on campus, but attends campus events to meet other Muslims. Throughout my research we would go together to events

bonding over both of our outsider statuses. She remarked to me at one of our first meetings, "you know more Muslims than me!"

Many of the Muslims shared this feeling of having the community as a means of making life practically easier and a way to support their Islamic identity. Kamal expressed his frustration in his earlier years at UMass in terms of his living situation. "Living in a dorm with non-Muslims was a huge issue because in Islam we have a huge emphasis on cleanliness. The bathrooms at UMass were a total mess and it was very hard for us." For these logistical reasons, Kamal expressed that is common for Muslims to live with other Muslims to maintain their practice.

"It makes things a lot easier. We have the same schedules, waking up at the same time to pray, same cleaning routines," Mahmood, the president of the Amherst College MSA also described about the apartment he shares with four other Muslim students. When Mahmood came to Amherst College in 2007, he found there was nothing going on with the Muslim community so he decided to start organizing events where Muslims on campus could meet. The community of Muslims who participate in organized events at Amherst College is small and counts only six or seven Muslims. They cook halal meals together in light of the fact that the dining services does not offer halal food. He referenced a verse from the 49th Surah – The Chambers, when talking about brotherhood in Islam. "It says, 'The believers are but a single

brotherhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two brothers; and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy.'" (Qur'an 49:10)

Mahmood's reference to the importance of community supports the anthropological debate which problematizes the notion of a Western essentialist self. Becker's study of embodied discourses in Fiji similarly noted this dialectical relationship between the self and society; where the self experience is simultaneously shaped by social processes which effect notions of the self. "In Fiji, as in many other Oceanic societies, self experience is intimately grounded in its relational context, its kind and village community. Individual action is ideally aimed at engaging and inculcating social relationships and promoting community interests." (1995:5) Similarly, for Muslim students who decide to be involved in the Muslim community—their involvement is interpreted as an essential aspect of their Muslim identity. Citing Qur'anic verses which insist on a necessary brotherhood between Muslims, members insist that their participation reinforces their identity made in the social context of their families. In the college environment, fellow members of the Muslim students association inherit roles of kinship previously ascribed to blood relations.

Hana', the president of the Smith MSA, Al-Iman, has expressed similar emotions in regards to the Muslim community. She had transferred to Smith from another school and said that she was excited to see another Muslim when she arrived on campus. "I remember I was coming out of the

gym and I saw a girl wearing a hijab. She was white and I was so happy to see there were other Muslims on campus. She invited me to join Al-Iman." Since then, Hana' has become increasingly involved in the community and expresses that her involvement with the community has caused her faith to increase. "It's great having Muslim friends, through them my faith has increased. We have these *halaqahs* where we talk about our faith. Knowledge is so important. You cannot serve or practice without knowledge. I have learned so much but I have a lot to do. I have learned so much from them." Hana''s statements reflect how the MSA is seen as an important source of knowledge, in which students engage in faith through discussion, exchanging their stories and struggles. In the following chapter I explore their engagement with religious knowledge further.

CHAPTER 2: KNOWLEDGE

From the beginning, Islam has been centered on the dissemination of its divine text. The beginnings of the religion, which today boasts 1.5 billion followers around the world, is traced to 610 when a single man was approached by the angel Jibrīl in a cave on the outskirts of Mecca. According to Muslims, the angel approached this man, the Prophet Mohammed, to be the messenger of the divine words of God. Over a period of 23 years, Mohammed is believed to have received these divine revelations, memorized them and subsequently dictated them to his companions, who memorized and recited them to others. The compilation of these revelations, which is known today as the holy Qur'an, consists of 114 Surahs or chapters and is the central book of guidance in Islam today. The book is conceptualized as the direct and perfect words of God, untainted by human imperfection and thus Muslims place a special emphasis on memorizing and reciting the Qur'an perfectly. The Prophet Mohammed emphasized this importance of memorizing and transmitting the message, "The best among you are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it." (Sahih Bukhari:61)

The memorization and performance of the recitation itself has special conditions for Muslims, who view linguistic translations of the Qur'an as

inauthentic to the original Arabic form. In Arabic, there is even a word for the scholars who have memorized and can recite the Qur'an properly, *hafidh.* Muslims believe that thousands of Mohammed's original followers*, sahabas,* were able to memorize the Qur'an in its entirety and recited it in front of the Prophet for his approval. Though the Qur'an was put into a written form in 653, there was still an emphasis on passing the message orally. Similar to the audiences in medieval Christian churches, the majority of followers were illiterate, thus the maintenance of the authentic performance of the oral tradition was especially important as a means of disseminating Islamic knowledge.

The maintenance of the oral tradition was maintained primarily by '*ulama* or Islamic scholars who studied at special Islamic schools called *madrasas* and learned the rules of recitation called *tajweed.* In medieval times, these scholars traveled throughout the Middle East and Asia and were received in these new places as learned scholars and righteous judges of Islamic law. Due to their long years of training they were revered with the authority to interpret the Qur'an and the collection of the Prophet's words called the Hadith. The emergence of colonial powers in countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Egypt enforced secularization and Westernization of the school systems, which again enforced a great dependency on religious scholars for the interpretation of Islam.

I construct this brief history of the gatekeepers of Islamic knowledge to demonstrate that though the sacredness of the Qur'an has not been questioned among Muslims, there has been a complex history that has governed the dissemination, performance and interpretation of Islamic knowledge. Though Muslims often say there is no authority in Islam but Allah himself, often in comparison to the nature of Christianity, which possesses a stratified system of clergy, the access and authority to interpret Islamic knowledge, has always been intertwined with certain institutions, social structures, cultural traditions and technology. The *hafidh* in Muslim societies were not commoners, but elite scholars who possessed a certain privilege in their schooling and ability to perform publicly. Access to Islamic knowledge was also restricted by the technology and the mediums that allowed it to travel across geographical space.

The engagement with Islamic knowledge looks very different today for many reasons. From television shows and sermon cassettes to social networking sites and YouTube videos, the proliferation of new mediums have allowed the message of Islam to spread more quickly and to new audiences. The mediums have not only widened access but they have also empowered more people to produce such media and engage with the Islamic text in different ways. Anderson has written on the sea change that the Internet has fueled. The knowledge, which was once only afforded to specialized scholars,

has been liberated from privileged access and informed a new philosophy of interpretation.

> The convergences and measures of uniformity characterize presentations that do not homogenize the faith brought on-line so much as affirm universal access and a sense of participation in a public sphere of listeners, watchers, or in cyberspeak, 'browsers.' This affirms new sense of interpretive freedom to go beyond previous forms and responsibility to speak for Islam in a "civic" public that goes beyond transferring discussions from more restricted to less restricted realism. Getting the word out supplants the earlier felt need to reach out to others like oneself; public space replaces virtual community. The move is not just from private to public, but a blurring of that distinction through communication and interpretation that bypasses the gatekeeping and sanctions embedded in older media (2003:55)

These changes have altered the traditional structures of authority and thus informed new philosophies of interpretations and have affected the way that practitioners identify themselves and imagine Islam. Sociologists of religion also have written extensively on the collapse of authority in religion in the age of modernity. Steve Bruce has observed, "the attitude of most believers has shifted: from being loyal followers to being selective consumers." (2008:36) while Hervieu-Léger termed these "bricolage" or "patchwork religions." (2005)

The second reason that the structures of authority look different today is the relocation of Islam into multicultural environments and the proliferation of mass education. Eickelmann has argued that fundamentalism is a particularly modern phenomenon sparked by the proliferation of mass communication and education. Through these media, Muslims have been

exposed to a variety of systems of interpretation and thus view their religion as a system among many. "Mass education and communication facilitate such awareness and, in changing the style and scale of possible discourse, reconfigure the nature of religious thought and action and encourage explicit debate over meaning." (Eickelmann 1992:644) The positioning of Islam as a world religion has caused Muslims to think about their religious practice globally and in relation to other religions, which in some cases point certain practitioners towards fundamentalism, but also pushes people towards a liberal attitude about authority and interpretation.

At a presentation to non-Muslims, one of the participants on a panel remarked, "It is very important to understand that there is a difference between Islam and the Islam that Muslims practice. Islam is the pure religion, but Muslims practice in different ways." This statement reflects how Muslims conceptualize their faith as individuals striving to fulfill a pure Islam, which no one can truly ever grasp. My informants would often remark to me that my mission to find American Islam was impossible because of the infinite interpretations that Muslims could enact. Hamza remarked on this diversity of interpretations as well.

> There are sources that say don't touch. Islam is perfect in its honest form. Scholars have opinions about what's haram but it might be wrong. Some people think that Cheetos are haram because of animal enzymes. There are even hadiths about musical instruments, but some hadiths are weak. They say something about musical instruments, men not being able to wear silk because they are feminine.

There are many parts of Islam that seem sexist, but if you look at it in context it makes sense. There are so many rules you're not sure if it's real or not. I stress that you shouldn't base the religion on people practicing it because it's not pure.

In early January I was invited by the UMass Amherst MSA to attend a weekend long retreat in New Hampshire organized by the MAS Youth of Boston. I was attracted by the name of the retreat, "Got the Qur'an App? How to Download the Wisdom of the Qur'an into your heart in the 21st Century." Kamal had talked about attending conferences in the past, describing them as great ways to meet other Muslims and thus strengthen one's faith. During the year he himself had traveled to Northeastern and NYU to hear popular imams speak. I decided that attending would be integral to understanding the community involvement and the larger networks formed among Muslim college students in the Northeast.

The title of the retreat itself reflected how technology has reconstituted how Muslims think about their religious engagement. The retreat included many lectures, where imams had lectured on how students could connect with Allah and integrate Islam on an individual basis and survive the struggle of remaining Muslim in secular and non-Muslim environments. After 5 a.m. morning prayers, an imam advised, "We are always connected to the world through our ipods, iPads, our cel phones. We need to be constantly connected to Allah in the same way. The Qur'an app is a great way to do that." Throughout the weekend, the imams encouraged the students to use their connections to the virtual world as resources in constructing their faith.

During many discussions, I could see the majority of attendees pulling out their iPods to reference the Qur'an in discussions about the relevance of the Qur'an in their daily lives.

The "Qur'an app" is actually several different applications which feature both audio and visual displays of the text in multiple languages, often including Arabic, English, Arabic transliteration, and *tafsir* – commentary which can include context, linguistic debates, and interpretations of meaning. It is common for Muslims to have multiple Qur'an apps and juggle between them, searching for appropriate translations of the Qur'an. This sort of juggling and search for meaning is something that was encouraged by imams at the retreat. "You must constantly be in conversation with the Qur'an. Plato was admired by the early Muslim scholars. He said that teachers are just the midwives of understanding." The imam strongly encouraged the students to learn Arabic, in order for individuals to interpret the Qur'an themselves. No longer could they depend on imams for this job, but emphasized that individual practitioners should take this on themselves. "If you learn Arabic yourself you can look at the verse and see the rationale. You must be having a conversation with the Qur'an daily."

At another lecture an imam posed the question, "How does the Qur'an shape your lives?" He said that engagement with the Qur'an should work on two levels: both as an inspiration for making logical sense and as a sort of resonating and emotional impression on a person. "These divine outpourings

should bring goose bumps. You must listen to the Qur'an with *sama'*. The chanting has a therapeutic effect on the soul, so make sure it is also audible." Another imam gave a lecture on how students should interpret the Qur'an.

> Remember the point of the story is that it's a book to be mined. People are supposed to reflect on it. It's not just an intellectual message but also a spiritual message that touches the heart. People are moved by the Qur'an's magic. It is supposed to be applied. Follow the reading with a symbolic action. Ask yourself, are you passing through the Qu'ran like a novel? Or do you go deeper? Make the effort to let it speak to you. Are you reading the Qur'an with your heart? If you read it with your heart it has a transformative power.

Though the belief in the auditory transformative power of the Qur'an, termed *sama'* in Arabic, is something that has been historically engrained in Islamic thought, the mediums through which practitioners now engage with the Qur'an has fueled new roles for individuals as they see themselves as the architects of their own individual religions. These changes became evident through many of my students stories of engagement with religious media in the college environment.

<div align="center">Reversion in College</div>

The issue of "knowing Islam" is a common discourse that I found among Muslim college students. To them, coming to know Islam is studying the texts, consuming religious media and applying this Islamic knowledge in their daily lives to form a deeper engagement with Allah. Many of my informants termed this deeper engagement "reversion"—most likely a term derived from converting. Like converts, reverts make a conscious choice and

undergo a large transformation from an empty practice to a more engaged and devotional practice.

"When you're born, you're a part of a religion. You do it because your parents tell you," Afya, a Brooklyn native detailed to me while we sat drinking tea in her dorm room at Smith College. "Around 18 or 19, I started looking at my life. I started looking at Islam and questioning things. Now I'm a Muslim because I choose to be, not because my parents are Muslim." For Afya, this distinction of choice was a central aspect of her Muslim identity. As a New Yorker, she described that she was raised around a diversity of people. "In New York, everyone's different." Afya remarked that there were even members of her own family who were not Muslim. "I grew up in a large family in Brooklyn. We live in seven brownstones purchased by my grandfather in the early 1800s." She described that her she was brought up to be close with her extended family which included cousins, aunts, and grandparents, who were not all necessarily Muslim. "My parents are Muslim, but not all of my cousins. Some of them are Christian and some don't practice a faith at all," she described to me. Afya's grandparents were converts to Islam during the Nation of Islam movement in the 1960's. "I think they knew Malcom X, but I'm not sure."

The history of how Afya's family came to be Muslim is not important to her. For Afya, she sees herself as the center of her own Islam, which is something she constructs herself through her own engagements with Islamic

media and individual practice. Like many of her peers, she sees her transition into the college environment as a critical moment in her life, as she moved from being a passive Muslim inspired only by the wishes of her parents to being an informed and active Muslim. "I opened the Qur'an started reading it and putting it together myself. It's important to research myself. It's important to know what my religion is." Afya's statement reflects the sort of transformation that many Muslim college students experience when they enter the college environment. There is a shift between their practice of Islam as an act of heritage, to their practice of Islam as a personal and individual choice.

Another Smith student, Hana', reflects a narrative of reversion. Hana', whose parents immigrated to the United States from Jordan and settled in Poughkeepsie, New York, described her religious upbringing as rudimentary.

> I used to not pray. I believed, but I was just lazy. I think it's because I never saw my mom doing them. My mom had a lot of faith but she doesn't fear Allah enough. I love her so much I think that had an effect on me. I think this is the difference between a practicing and a non-practicing Muslim. You have to be putting in the effort. I never did that growing up. I remember praying to God to make me want to pray. One time my sister asked me, "Why don't you pray? Aren't you afraid of going to hell?"

Like Afya, Hana''s parents did not teach her Arabic, nor set an example for being strict of performing the prayers on time. She expressed how the college environment enabled her to foster better practices through both her engagement with the community and encounter with Islam through media consumption. Hana''s knowledge of Surahs, the 114 chapters of the Qur'an

which Muslims are meant to study, memorize, and use while performing *salat*,

or daily prayers, has been aided by her consumption of YouTube videos.

> When I was a kid, I learned the Surahs through transliteration and all I knew were little Surahs. There was an important one, Surah 56 – The Event – the first long Surah I had exposure to. Another important one was Surah 67 – The Kingdom. I went on YouTube for verse and the English translation would come up. I know now about the Day of Judgement. In Islam we believe in different levels of paradise. This Surah paints the picture of afterlife, paints the inevitable. Now I recognize my own mortality.

Hana''s experience of an increased knowledge of Islam was facilitated

both by her peers at college and through individual study of the Surahs as

provided in her books and consumption of YouTube Surahs which display the

English translation with the Arabic reading. Her viewings of the YouTube

Surahs helped her learn Arabic and are an essential aspect of her practice.

"Sometimes when I am feeling very lost, I will just type in YouTube, 'Qur'an'

and click on a random video, and I always feel that the Allah is speaking to

me." Hana' now serves as the president of the MSA at Smith College.

<u>Practicing Amid the Noise</u>

In Muslim societies, the *adhān* or call to prayer signals Muslims to

make *salat* or to pray at five proscribed times of the day. The adhān is sung

from the minarets of the mosques, projected by loudspeakers and pervasive in

public spaces, from walkers on the streets to people sitting in restaurants, the

adhān is integral to the aural landscape of Muslim countries. The sparseness

of Muslims in western contexts and the rules, which govern secular spaces in

the West, prevent such public projection of the call to prayer. Instead,

mosques in western contexts often deliver the call to prayer within the walls

of their domain. Western Muslims understand this need for privacy, "We

obviously can't have the call to prayer in the streets, so we just have it in the

mosque," Mahmood remarked to me when discussing the issue. This

relocation of a sound that has traditionally been so public into a private space

reflects a greater trend towards Muslims re-fashioning their practices so they

align with western notions of privacy and secular spaces.

Muslims are conscious of the fact that they must reconstitute their

religion in private spaces and in their narratives they talk about maintaining a

sense of piety amongst the "noise" of mainstream society. The invocation of

noise is a new take on the conservative belief that music is *haram*. In this

remapping, the noise and distractions of mainstream society is recast as the

jihad or struggle to remain pious. For Muslims, reminders of their faith could

include applications on their phone that signal the times for salat but they also

include the practice of pious listening. Afya characterizes her private listening

of music as a way to connect with Allah amidst the "noise" of society.

> We live in a very ego driven and materialistic world that can
> consciously or subconsciously pollute our minds sometimes, and it's
> important to meditate on the simple things in life and remember why
> we're here on earth, and how it's our duty and purpose to make the
> world how we wish to see it. When I listen to music that I like by an
> Islamic artist I find it to be very therapeutic and an overall humbling
> experience, in addition to praying and reading the Holy Qur'an.

Others too also expressed the importance of religious listening. Hana'

said when she started becoming more religious she stopped listening to music.

"I used to listen to music a lot, but I don't anymore. I don't need it." Uzma,

also said the same sentiment. "I don't listen to music. It's just a distraction,

but I do listen to Qur'an recitation. It is the most beautiful thing you can

hear." Uzma's distinction between music and Qur'an recitation reflects a

traditional Islamic view of listening. These girls prize a divine listening mode

over the noise of mainstream music.[3]

Other students also noted that they incorporated particular bodily

disciplines into an Islamic domain. One example of such reappropriation was

Divya, who incorporated her practice of Japanese and Korean martial arts as

part of her Islamic practice.

> When I started karate, it was more because I wanted to be more strong
> and disciplined. As I became more experienced not only in karate but
> practice and understand Islam too, I began to notice the similarities.
> We would take breaks during the two-hour long classes to pray and
> then resume practice immediately. So since then, I have not really
> thought of my practice of karate and practice of Islam as any different
> from each other. Just like Islam, practicing martial arts has become a
> part of my faith now.

Deea reconciles her practice of martial arts with what she knows about

Islamic history and principles.

> Islam always stresses the importance of both being physically and
> mentally fit—even our Prophet used to meditate in Cave Hira for
> spiritual wellbeing. When I think about how Islam was established, it

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[3] The issue of music in Islam is a one explored much more in depth by many other scholars.
Some American Muslims go so far to protest against the idea that music is *haram* by their
involvement in the Punk Muslim movement inspired by the 2003 book Taqwacore (Hosman
2009) or through their Muslim expressions of identity in hip hop (Alim 2005)

is in fact a religion spread by sword. In other words, there were battles and struggles when Islam in general was under attack when the Prophet was trying to spread the message, so he fought back to protect what was important to him. We have the same principle in martial arts - self-defense. The first thing you are taught is to not start a fight no matter how much you are provoked and your fist should be the last resort. When I started karate almost six years ago, my sensei taught me this first lesson. It was a promise I had to make to myself and to my teacher.

Similarly Hana' described her practice of yoga as something she saw as a disciple that strengthened her faith. "Your body is your gift from Allah. He wants us to nurture it, to honor it. I honor my body through this practice." Hana' began practicing yoga in college through a physical education class and quickly started to see connections between yoga principles and Islamic ones. She described that she has now integrated the yoga practice into her prayer routine, by practicing yoga before making salat. "It gets me in the right frame of mind to be with God." Hana' and Afya's narratives reflect a traditional view on forming a disciplined practice as a connection to God combined with an agentive view of their practice. I will now turn to another segment of the population who exemplify an increasing agency and religious engagement through new media: new converts.

Conversion Narratives

In 2007, Joseph O'Donnell entered into college as a typical UMass Amherst freshman. He had grown up in a small town just outside of Boston to Catholic parents and describes his childhood as lacking religious direction. "I

didn't learn any religion from my parents. They are Christian, I guess, but not religious at all." Though he was born in Charlestown, he grew up mostly in Scituate, MA. "I hate that town. There's no diversity, no Muslims except one family. That town is just full of dumb kids that just drink." Today, Joseph O'Donnell is Hamza Yusef O'Donnell. He chose the name Hamza after the Prophet Mohammed's Uncle, Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib. "He was a great hunter and warrior, and after his conversion he made it easier for the Muslims to practice since he was so respected and feared in Mecca. I watched this movie called *The Message* and decided that I really liked the name Hamza. Eventually I began introducing myself as such, especially to Muslims. Nowadays, I get weirded out when someone calls me anything else."

Hamza's describes his childhood dissatisfaction with the non-spirituality of his parents and his subsequent conversion to Islam as self-directed. When I asked him at what point he converted he said, "You see that's a trick question. There isn't a point at which you *decide* to convert. When you believe something in your heart, that's when you convert." This distinction shows how many tell their narratives of conversion. Converts often express a personal feeling towards the rationality they find in the Qur'an.

> First semester of freshman year I knew I was interested. It was sort of random, some person on the internet I didn't know suggested that I read the Qur'an in English, so I picked up a copy of the Qur'an at Barnes and Noble and began reading. Over winter break I started reading and did research on the Internet. The book was convincing to me.

Another convert, Matt Boisselle constructed his conversion narrative similarly. "My family is Presbyterian but not really practicing, only during the holiday season. God didn't really exist outside of Sunday." Matt also decided to research Islam and wanted to decide for himself if it made sense. "I'm a very math and science person, very logical. When I was very young I had this dilemma: I had to choose between science and religion. I had to choose did I believe in evolution or God. I did all this research and compared the two. For me religion only meant Christianity."

Because of the conflicts that Matt found in Christianity he decided to become an atheist at 13, but was affected by his friend Mike who had converted to Islam. His friend made him curious about the religion and Matt decided to research Islam for himself.

> I read the autobiography of Malcom X and I was really drawn to his personality. I never had a relationship with God. I quit drinking. I kept learning more. The more I learned about Islam, the more I was convinced it was true. I was trying to prove it was wrong. It's preserved. I couldn't rationalize why he went through the sacrifice. I studied scientific miracles in the Qur'an. One after another after another, what are the chances that some man in the desert could write this book that doesn't have mistakes or coincidences in it. I was pretty blown away. I read about the hereafter. I thought about death. I kept preparing for all these things I was uncertain about. If I'm gonna die, Islam or nothing. I don't want to take my chances.

After conducting his research, Matt decided to do the profession of faith in June of 2001.For both Matt and Hamza, they describe the process of becoming a Muslim as awkward at first.

> A lot of people think that piety comes first – but belief did for me. I had to memorize all the Surahs, learn how to pray. I learned from the

Internet and hearing people around me. There are tutorials on YouTube. There are reciters that record them and put them online. I kept listening to those. You have to pronounce it with an Arabic accent. You have to work on perfecting the accent. You hear it and read it at the same time. Living in the same building helps you to learn it because you hear the same Surahs all the time because you have to say them in the prayers.

It is common for converts to remark that they had trouble finding logic in Christianity. Maria, a doctor in Boston, remarked that she was in medical school when she first thought about converting. "I was dealing with all of these complicated issues, like mortality and death and felt I needed a way to make sense of it all." Maria described that she started reading the Qur'an, looking up YouTube videos online

The converts in my research, despite very different stories and backgrounds, had similar conversion processes in that they were seeking explanations and purpose in their lives. Islam provided a way to make sense of their purpose, in a way, which was both instructive and self-directed. Their first encounter with the Qur'an was self-directed, which seems to be a critical aspect in their conversion. They were unhappy with the sort of structures imposed upon them in Christianity and felt more empowered in their engagement with Islam. Matt expressed frustration with what he called Christians' hypocritical suppression of logic. "The only argument they had [for creationism] was that evolution wasn't in the Bible, but it's been translated a bizillion times." Converts expressed that they felt that the Qur'an

was both truth and open enough to be applicable and integrated into their personal beliefs and their daily lives.

After deciding to convert, converts continued using media to learn appropriate bodily practices and more information about Islamic thought. "I learned how to pray online. I didn't really feel comfortable going to a mosque right away. I went to a mosque one day and said hello to someone in the bathroom, and someone was like, 'You're not supposed to say hello in the bathroom!'" Instead, Maria found a program online to teach her the prostrations, rules and the meanings behind the recitations all in the comfort of her own home. Maria also said she learned how to wear a hijab by watching videos online. "It was really bad in the beginning. It looked bad, there would be hair sticking out here and there. I watched a whole bunch of videos, kept practicing, and now I feel confident about it."

This learning and self-discipline through watching YouTube videos is comparable to what Charles Hirschkind found in his study of sermon cassette listening in Egypt. Hirschkind argues that the practice of listening to tape-recorded sermons is an exercise of ethical self-discipline where Egyptian Muslims developed "an ethically responsive sensorium: the requisite sensibilities that they see as enabling them to live as devout Muslims in a world increasingly ordered by secular rationalities." (2001:624) Contemporary converts similarly rely heavily on these media to learn Arabic, prayers, and

more about Islam when they feel uncomfortable approaching "native"

Muslims.

Matt recalled that his Arabic was unskilled in the beginning. "I tried to

memorize the *shahada* on June 1, 2001. I tried to say it but I totally botched it.

but my friend Mike said, 'Let's go to the mosque this weekend.' We sat in a

circle. We became really close." For Matt the elements of community and the

accessibility of Islamic knowledge were both fundamental in facilitating his

conversion process. This trend is common among most American converts

who are searching for an alternative to Christianity. Islam is attractive because

of the nature of the conversion process, which allows for individuals to be the

determiner of their own individual spirituality. This works well within the

framework of the individualist mentality of many Americans.

The narratives presented in this chapter have exemplified the ways that

traditional treatments and engagements with Islamic knowledge have been

remapped onto new media and technologies, philosophies of interpretations

and American individualist consumer views on religions. Formerly restrictive

access to knowledge and the authority to interpret placed solely on elite

scholars has been deconstructed through these new mediums and

philosophies, thus empowering college students to construct their own

individual Islams. In the next chapter, I will explore the implications of

presentations made by American Muslims, as they take on self-appointed

roles as spokespeople or presenters in order to cultivate an "authentic

American Muslim Identity" in contestation to dominant representations in the

U.S. public sphere through creative expressions such as film, music and

interfaith dialogue.

CHAPTER 3: PRESENTATIONS

When Mount Holyoke College and Female Seminary was founded in

1837, the institution was founded as a non-denominational Christian

institution. The registrar's records from those early years reflect a wide

diversity of Christian sects among the students. For many years the college

remained solely Christian. The diversity of the campus began growing as

religion in the Pioneer Valley did. The first recorded Jewish student at the

college was enrolled in 1908 and in the year 1933, the registrar's records

denote one penciled-in "Mohammedan" at the college.

In 1931, Mount Holyoke established the Fellowship of Faiths in order

to create a greater support system for the individual religious communities.

The Fellowship gained national attention. An article in the *New York Times*

expressed the importance that such an organization had on the college

campus.

> The function of a campus religious organization is to promote creative
> spiritual life through the association of those who seek the highest
> values. The development of character for its value to the individual
> and worth to the community is the primary concern for the
> organization. The organization will endeavor to provide opportunities
> for the worship of God, for guidance in intellectual and religious
> struggles, and for expression in purposeful action. (New York Times
> 1931)

From this point on, religious life became a privatized yet supported entity to be maintained at an institutional level. In its institutional philosophy, religious life was linked to the discourses of social service and fostering human values.

When mandatory religious practice was abolished in 1959, the campus moved towards a chaplain system, which hired chaplains to help lead the respective religious communities at the time. At this time there were three chaplains hired: a Catholic, a Jewish and a Protestant Chaplain. In 1997, religious life on Mount Holyoke's campus was put under review under the leadership of John Grayson, and an office of Religious Life was established under the philosophy that mind, body *and* spirit were essential aspects of the institution. "Cultivation of mind, body and spirit has always been central to Mount Holyoke's mission," Grayson noted. "To talk about spiritual growth and ethical reflection means we must try to unite the tradition of this great institution with the moral challenges facing us in the future." (College Street Journal 1997) It was also in that year that a Muslim Chaplain was first hired to support an already active Muslim Student Association, named UMMA. "The new dean should be more instrumental in strengthening discussion groups between students of different religions and providing knowledge of all religions, according to the Dean of Religious Life Search Committee (Brodeur 1997). With the founding of this new office, interfaith dialogue also became a central aspect of the mission statement.

My investigation of the history of "religious" life on Mount Holyoke's campus underlines the greater theoretical issues that this chapter examines. When I first went into the archives at Mount Holyoke, I had expected to find a historical event in which the campus undergone a radical shift of secularization. However, what I found was that the closest thing to secularization was the installation of a choice to be religious. This expectation of mine underlies the misconceptions that this chapter addresses. Though from a modern perspective we often view the present situation as a result of the "secularization" of a once religious institution, closer inspection shows that the campus did not so much undergo a secularization process in which the sacred was stripped from the institution's founding ideology, but rather religion was discursively and philosophically reconstituted. Religion became a choice and a concept, which interacted with secular attitudes of rationality and science.

In the modern world, religion has been resituated onto a universal plane—intertwined with an emphasis on human social values and talked about as necessary in influencing individuals and communities with ethics, which lead to human progress and peace. In this chapter I show how Muslims have participated in this particularly American discourse of legitimizing religion through a universalist discourse by presenting American Islam as one among the market of peaceful religions which Americans are comfortable with. No doubt this movement towards presentations is related to the negative

representation and unfamiliarity of the American public sphere with Islam when compared to popular opinions on Judaism and Christianity, but it is also related to the particular cultural treatment of religion in America more broadly and how the religious are seeking to legitimate their religious practice under secular doctrines.

<u>Salman Ahmed and the Humanity Game</u>

On a winter night at Smith College Campus Center, a Pakistani born Muslim with a guitar stood in front of an auditorium of students and posed the question, "Who has Muslim friends? Who has been to a Muslim majority country before?" The rock star musician does not embody a stereotypical South Asian look; though he sports a beard, he also wears his hair in a long ponytail, and accessorizes himself with a studded jean jacket and fur hat. The musician spoke with an American accent as recounted the story of how as a teenager he related more to Led Zeppelin than to anything he read in the Qur'an.

> When I moved to New York, it was like I had landed on a different planet. For the first couple of years, TV and radio were my best friends. I didn't have a lot of American friends and my mother was very conservative. There was a guy who told me if I wanted to be cool, I'd have to buy a ticket to this show because the whole school was going. So I asked my conservative Pakistani mother if I could go and she told me, 'if you do drugs, I'm going to kill you!' So she drove me to Madison Square Garden and I was wearing red and white striped pants and a yellow floral shirt. When I went in there I breathed a lot of smoke, but what I heard were "mystical sounds." People were screaming Kashmir! It was an introduction to different forms of music. It transformed me. I heard someone whisper to me, "Get a guitar."

Ahmad worked to get a guitar and began practicing Led Zeppelin songs on it, to his parents' surprise. His family sent him back to Pakistan, where music was banned under the Taliban's rule. After experiencing struggles as a musician he started a band called Junoon, which gained popularity throughout Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora. Ahmad has been active in speaking about humanitarian issues, adamant that music could work as a bridge between the West and the "Islamic world." At the Smith College concert and lecture he expressed, "Arts and culture express themselves, take away the fear and anxiety. The power of music is transformative— it builds bridges and bridges and breaks down walls. You don't have to say a word, just strum a guitar."

Ahmad's Smith lecture was one among many on the American college circuit, as he has made countless presentations such as these at Columbia, Yale, Havard, Stanford and MIT. Ahmed has also written a book called *Rock and Roll Jihad*, in which he writes his story and makes claims that his rock and roll is a way to fight negative images of Islam. "On September 11th, they didn't just hijack the planes, they hijacked a culture and Islam. Now they are the ones that represent it. We need to steal it back!" he cried, beckoning the audience to become involved. "Radicals are winning this debate. Music, storytelling, movies— this is how we get to know each other. I would have never known this without rock and roll." Ahmad's own story of encounter with Western culture through Led Zepellin serves as a convincing argument

for the value of music in changing people's minds. For the past decade,

Ahmad has been a prominent figure, playing at events such as the Building

Human Rights Culture Gala, the Empower Peace program with students in

Pakistan, and fundraising for Hurricane Katrina victims. Most recently, in

coordination with the UN, Ahmad has joined relief operations for the October

2005 earthquake victims in northern Pakistan.

Ahmad's music makes is a hybrid of rock and Sufi influences – a

genre he has called Sufirock. His philosophy of composition is evident in his

description of how he came up with the idea for his song, *Natchooon G*.

> There's a place in Lahore called Shah Jamal where folks show up
> every Thursday night and lose themselves in the ecstatic *dhol* rhythms
> Pappu Sain. As the rhythm quickened, I started dancing more excitedly
> and felt totally liberated, zoning out from reality. I was barefoot and
> there was broken glass where I was dancing. It cut both my feet and I
> was bleeding all over the floor, yet strangely, I remained unaware of
> any pain until I stopped dancing!
>
> Cut to a New York City nightclub called CBGBs. I hear a fast rave
> dance rhythm and bingo, *Yaar mein nachoon gi* comes into my head.
> The traditional dhol meets the aching refrain of my wailing guitar
> feedback.
>
> I like the fact that the song is a tribute to the Sufi poets and their
> ecstatic self-surrender to God. I would love people in western clubs to
> dig it as well because it would be cool to show co-existence and
> cultural harmony through music and dance. (ISufiRock.com)

Ahdmad's hybridic use of musical elements and political statements are part

of what Jessica Winegar has called the humanity game, in which art is posited

as a universal in which all of humanity can play (Winegar 2008). Ahmad, is

one of the figures among a group of American Muslims who are using this

trope to make claims about a "true Islam" to contest the image of violent,

militaristic, and oppressive images in the public sphere.

This trend has been observed and implemented into the lives of the

students I worked with. My students remarked that they felt that they must

contribute to the discussion and work to shape the representations of Islam.

Often my students would remark that their involvement in the MSA was

based on a desire to take a stand against the media images in the public

sphere.

> A lot of people are basing it off of an uninformed Islam. I would never want to hurt the families of the people hurt in September 11th, but the question is why are they hurt by a mosque? Yes, the guys who did it were Muslim but they are so far away from any Muslims I've ever met and that's a lot. The label was Muslim but they weren't Muslim in practice. They shouldn't be offended. I feel like we need to show them the true Islam. I don't care if someone comes up to me and asks me. I just don't want them to harbor grudges based on misinformation. We have to show them how we do it, pull out verses from the Koran and show them what Islam is about.

The discussions that take place are often trying to present a "true"

Islam, which for the presenters is what is found in the Qur'an. The discussions

are usually situated around controversial topics, which are brought up when

discussing Islam as oppressive to women. One of the issues was Muslims and

9/11. A common topic is a discussion around the word, *jihad.*

> It's one of the hugest misconceptions in Islam. It's really just a daily struggle keeping religion with God. What is that we can do to show that we care? More of an effort needs to be made I suppose. I think the media is forcing Muslims to try and demonstrate that they are good people but I don't feel it's my responsibility to go out and show it. I just want to live my life." "I get tired of people trying to put Muslims in a box. We are humans too. Always in a state of self improvement."

At another event, a Mona, a Muslim student at Mount Holyoke commented, "There are many verses in the Qur'an that are taken out of context. There are many places that says to fight but they are within stories and when they are taken out of context people manipulate them to fulfill their agendas." These statements show a need to present a peaceful Islam, a defensive statement against the representation of a violent Islam as presented in the public sphere.

At a film screening and discussion panel, a non-Muslim male asked a question, posing, "Do you think that there have been any positive effects of 9/11? I mean, I don't think I would be here if this didn't happen." The Imam replied,

> I agree with you, there have been some positive effects in terms of people being curious. At the time of September 11, I was at the Cambridge mosque and there were so many Americans coming to the mosque asking questions about our faith. The administrators and staff were overwhelmed. We began forming an outreach committee to help educate people. I think that Islam is still a recent addition to the country. It's going to take awhile for it to become like where the Jews are today, people know what a synagogue is, what the Torah is but a lot of people don't know what a *masjid* is or what an imam is. Right now I see more negativity than gains. Muslims right now are required to educate themselves and the public.

> Other members of the organizations have expressed that these conversations and events have been prompted by the events from September 11. "Before the media spotlight wasn't on Muslims, we could just be discreet. Now I feel like I have to explain everything I do," Mahmood, the Amherst college MSA president noted.

A leader in the Mount Holyoke Muslim community remarked, "I think this is our contemporary Muslim struggle, this is what we are going to be judged on: how we reacted to this time of crisis."

Eid Dinners and Cultural Displays

One of the main ways that students attempted to show the true Islam

was by making presentations at Eid Dinners, annual events during the fall

semester organized by MSAs during the fall semester. Though the origin of

the event is to celebrate *Eid Al-Adha* amongst the Muslim student community,

the event has evolved to encompass the greater campus community as a

display of Islam. The presentations are used similar to the way that displays of

Jewish history in museums "secured for Judaism a central place in the history

of religion, and defined themselves as a Bible people" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

1998:5). Kirshenblatt traces the treatment of Jewish people in exhibitions of

Jewish people created by Cyrus Adler between 1888 and 1897. Adler's

displays do not treat Judaism as primitive people but instead legitimated the

Jewish people within Western culture and history.

> In this way Adler not only fostered religion as a field of scientific
> study that would encourage religious tolerance, he also succeeded in
> treating Judaism as a unified religion and Jews as a unified religious
> community… He thereby integrated Jews conceptually into the larger
> category of Western civilization and won for them a privileged
> position at the beginning of monotheism. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett
> 1998:5)

The story of Adler's exhibitions demonstrates how public displays

have the power to integrate a people, culture and religious community into a

public imaginary. Muslims utilize this same function in their presentations,

drawing attention to themselves as a diverse but unified community, related to

the other Abrahamic religions and legitimate among the plane of American religions.

The Eid dinners were always advertised via Facebook and on flyers across the campuses as a "cultural event." The Smith Eid Dinner flyer featured Arabic looking scripts over a background image of nomads wandering through the Arabian desert with camels in hand. At the event, students wear traditional formal clothes from their countries of heritage; Pakistanis wore *shalwar kamiz*, Arabs wore dresses called *abayas.* Local students invite their family members to attend the celebrations, yet the majority of attendants are Muslim students and the programming for the evenings are directed towards non-Muslims. When I spoke with non-Muslim attendants about what made them decide to come to the event they expressed an interest in learning about Islam. The events are catered by Mediterranean cuisine and are marked as "traditional Islamic food," which often includes falafel, hummus, pita bread, and baklava for desert. Slideshow presentations showcase pictures of Muslims practicing around the world, from China to the Philippines, Bangladesh— the collage of pictures evoke a visual representation of what Muslims imagine as the *ummah,* the global community of Muslims.

The programming consists of students speaking on the basic ideas of Islam, what I call the "neatly packaged Islam." These definitions include describing the Five Pillars, introducing the audience to Arabic words such as

hajj, salat, and *Allah*. They often demonstrate adhan or the call to prayer. In their explanation of Islam, there are often references to other religion, emphasizing the fact that Muslims worship the same God as Christians and Jews. This emphasis on monotheism and the relationship between Islam and Christianity and Judaism illustrates how the students are asserting their religious practice onto the plane of religions in the American imaginary.

At another event organized by the UMass MSA, the independent film, *Bilal's Stand* was screened for an audience of Muslims and non-Muslims. The director of the film, Sultan Sharrief remarked that he wanted to show a film that depicted a Muslim character as having normal struggles. The film is touring around universities and is a part of a movement which trying to emphasis the diversity of Muslim identities. The film focuses on Bilal, a lower class Black teenager in Detroit, Michigan who has greater dreams than inheriting his family owned taxi stand business. The film focuses on Bilal's struggle with his family, who want Bilal to stay at home and take care of the family instead of attending family.

Writer Sultan Sharrief described the film as loosely autobiographical as he based Bilal's struggles on his own. The film was made with non-professional actors, as Sharrief hand selected "real kids" from the Detroit neighborhood he grew up in and thus reflects the sort of indigenous filmmaking that Faye Ginsburg observed in her investigation of indigenous media making among aboriginal Australians. This is not to say that Muslims

are similar to indigenous people in their new introduction to media technologies, but that their production serves as a powerful means of "collective self production." (Ginsburg 1991) Sharrief is currently touring around the country to screen the film.

Islam is not the main focus of the film, but is featured in two scenes: Bilal makes salat in one scene and his father beckons him to pray in another. The treatment of Islam in the film seeks to normalize the Muslim identity, by showcasing the multiple negotiations that Bilal works through, his Muslim identity becomes merely a layer of a more complex identity. Sharrief highlights universal American teen struggles including the trials and tribulations of dealing with expectations from parents, poverty, friends, and race issues in the setting of an urban neighborhood in Detroit. At the UMass discussion of the film, non-Muslims expressed that the film had opened their eyes to another population of Muslims, which they had not considered.

A Muslim in the audience had remarked, "I love the film because it shows a different kind of Muslim. Most people think that all Muslims are Arabs, but we are so much more diverse. It also shows we have the same issues as Americans."

<u>Inter-Faith Dialogue</u>

Interfaith activity on the outside may just seem like learning about other faiths, but I argue that contemporary interfaith activity plays an enormous role in the re-imagining of Islam. Though early Islamic societies

were very tolerant of religious pluralism, the nature of interfaith activity today

reflects a re-negotiation of Islam into a network of other religious groups.

Muslim student groups seem especially interested in forming relationships and

dialogues with the two other Abrahamic religions: Christianity and Judaism in

order to legitimate Islam into the American imagination. Muslims often

compare their struggle to the struggle of Jews being integrated into an

American identity. "Many of the things they say about Muslims, people were

saying about Jews awhile back. The reason we have this discrimination is

because they don't know us, so we have to get them to know us," Hana' had

said at a meeting discussing interfaith work.

In addition they see their interfaith work as part of an Islamic concept

of *dawa,* which literally means the call in Arabic. The concept is that Muslims

should spread the message of Allah around the world to both Muslims and

non-Muslims. The UMass MSA participates in *dawa* through many of their

activities which present Islam to non-Muslims. One of the spaces which has a

sustained focus on presenting Islam is a weekly Bible and Qur'an study with a

Christian group in which students prepare a mini-presentation of sacred text.

The presenters will present their interpretations and both groups will discuss

the meanings, similarities and differences between the Islamic and Christian

perspectives.

The Bible-Qur'an study began when the leader of the Intervarsity

Christian Group played cricket with a team of many Muslims. In their

informal conversations, the leader of the group decided it would be interesting to learn more about the Muslim faith. The study groups have been operating for three years now, but only recently has the Christian group started presenting. Nowadays, the two groups alternate, one week the Christians will present a text from the Bible and the next, the Muslims will present a text from the Qur'an. In this way, the two groups attempt to package their religion in similar mediums (through text) and subsequently reconcile issues such as creation and death. I have spoken with presenters from both groups, and both groups have remarked that they often have trouble explaining the differences between the two religions.

The Muslims usually select a Surah, and have the Christians listen to the recitation in Arabic and then go over the translation of the text into English. During the sessions the appointed student will try to explain the significance of each line of text. What is interesting in these discussions is the ways that the two groups try to make sense of each other's religions through the lens of their own.

For example, one week the topic of discussion was the *Ayat-Al Kursi* Surat al-Baqarah (The Chapter of the Cow) (2:225). The leader of the discussion was going through the line *La ta'khudhuhu sinatun wa la nawm* which reads in English as "Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep." While reviewing the line the leader of the discussion said, "this part is up to debate with you guys who believe that God rested on the seventh day. Muslims don't

believe that God would have to rest." And the Christians responded, "It's not so much that we believed that God had to rest but that on the seventh day he looked back on what he created."

Another instance of debate was the line "Man dhal-ladhi yashfa'u indahu illa bi-idhnihi, which reads as "Who is the that can intercede with His, except by his leave?" The Muslims pointed out that this was another point of debate in terms of the Christian's belief in Jesus. The trinity is something that always comes up in their dialogues since the Muslims claim that there is a direct interaction with God in Islam, while they believe Christians have to go through a person, Jesus, to speak with God. The Christians will attempt to explain the Trinity, "Jesus Christ is the son of God and simultaneously God." One of the leaders of the Christian group spoke afterwards, "I think I'm going to try and use the water example—water has different states but it is always made up of the same thing if it's liquid or water."

When I asked the Christians who were involved in the dialogues why they participated in them, they responded, "I don't know anything about Islam and it's great to learn from these guys how they practice and what is significant to them because we can see the similarities and differences between our religions." The participants in these interfaith dialogues are looking for ways to make sense of each other's religions because they have a goal of living in a peaceful society. This sort of discussion is part of a greater

trend on college campuses of interfaith dialogue, which hopes to counteract the image of religion in general as causing conflict.

At Mount Holyoke, the Inter-Faith Council organizes similar events where people of many faiths come together to discuss similarities and differences. The leader of this initiative said in an introductory speech, "We all know what bad looks like when it comes to interfaith cooperation, but we're trying to figure out what good looks like." At these events, similar discussions are held, with discussion questions regarding religion and violence. At these presentations, Muslims are often trying to counteract the representation of Islam as violent, arguing a true Islam is based in peace and citing instances of the Qur'an, which are more universal.

These rhetorics of universalism are of course comforting to the people who participate in them. They hope to see their work as a greater model for peace and social justice in the world, however they do not take into account all perspectives and are quick to gloss over inconsistencies and even boundaries within their respective communities. Thus far my thesis has been focused on the center of Muslim student groups, ignoring the students who are perhaps ostracized by some groups or student who choose other paths than the active, practicing and termed "conservative" Muslims. In the next chapter I unpack the labels, distinctions and boundaries underneath these claims of universality.

CHAPTER 4: BOUNDARIES

Throughout this thesis I have emphasized how non-Muslims have stereotyped Muslims, however categorization and expectations exist even within the Muslim community. Though not formally evoked, the boundaries become more apparent in particular situations. The identities of individuals in Islam are complex and unstable as they are negotiated among a sea of classifications. In this chapter I discuss three types of categorizations or labels which Muslims use to negotiate their identities within: degrees of religiousness, ethnic identity and national identity. Though I discuss only these three I must stress that these are not the only identities that Muslims face in their constructions of self nor are these identities fixed. Instead I emphasize that these boundaries are made visible or drawn in particular contexts and thus American Muslims are engaged in complex processes of unstable selfhood as described by Battaglia. "Selfhood by this figuration is a chronically unstable productivity brought situationally—not invariably—to some imaginary order, to some purpose, as realized in the course of culturally patterned interactions." (Battaglia 1995:2) I outline these categories and the interactions, which prompt boundaries to be drawn not to put Muslims into boxes but rather to show the arena in which Muslims are constantly renegotiating their identities. Drawing on Frederik Barthes' conceptualization of boundaries as opposed to

particular qualities as the theoretical constitutions to study ethnic groups, I analyze the multiple ways that Muslims are drawing boundaries between another and problematize the notion of a unified Islamic global community, or *ummah*. Instead I illustrate that individuals face difficult struggles in their quest for self-identification.

Labels of "Religiosity"

Perhaps the hardest types of boundaries to discuss within the Muslim community are the boundaries, which separate Muslims based on degrees on religiousness. "Back-biting" or talking ill of others is a particular sin in Islam, so many Muslims will not openly express their opinions about other Muslims. Also, they often say that the only true judge of one's character is Allah, who can see the difference between a Muslim with intention versus a Muslim without. However, in certain cases, and when not meaning to purposely separate people out, Muslims will employ the labels "practicing," "non-practing," "conservative," "liberal" and "progressive." In an early interview Mahmood remarked, "To be a Muslim you must believe a certain set of things. Those principles are compassion, humane-ness, kindness, community, modesty and these all inform daily life, but you're obviously in a different category if you're practicing." When asked to define practicing he mentioned dress, making prayers on time and avoiding "temptation" which in Islam often means avoiding sexual arousal or activity. "Modesty will inform what I wear.

I'm often overlooked as a male, but what I wear does matter. It's important

because we need to avoid temptation." In these instances the boundaries are

visible, but Muslims also distinguish between practicing Muslims and non--

practicing Muslims which discount the outward display of piety and

emphasize the internal commitment to God, they call intention. Divya

expressed this view from her own experience.

> A practicing Muslim practices the Islamic principles but with sincerity and complete devotion to Allah. I am saying this because a non-practicing Muslim might also perform those duties but to show off for example, a Muslim handing out zaka'h (charity). In Islam it is required to be done in privacy but there are people who perform zaka'h in public, attempting to showing off that he/she is very generous. Then there are people who are Muslims because their parents or whole are Muslim but they do not possess an ounce of obligation to perform religious duties nor devote themselves to Allah. In my words, they are merely living with the title of a "Muslim" but are not really practicing. So see, it is actually "sincerity" and your intentions that ultimately differentiate a practicing Muslim from a non-practicing Muslim."

In a very general sense, "conservative" tends to be grouped with

people who cover while liberal is tending to be a more selective Muslim,

associated with women who do not wear their hijabs, do not necessarily make

their prayers on time, and are only Islamic in certain situations. However,

these are not labels that are used are not guided by rules but are usually

invoked relationally.

Sagarika, an international student from Bangladesh at Mount Holyoke,

considers herself a practicing Muslim, though she understands that she is

viewed as liberal. She does not participate in any of the UMMA activities nor

does she described herself as very religious. "I was invited to UMMA when I

first got here and it was at the time when I was still trying to decide where I stood. I realized I didn't really identify with the more conservative girls." Sagarika employs the word conservative to describe students who participate in formal Muslim activities and says that the term is associated with Muslims who cover and follow all of the rules of Islam to a tee. "I am religious to a certain extent. I mean I pray. I believe in Allah, but I mean I have tattoos, which is totally against the religion. I drink, but I don't eat pork. " Sagarika's decisions reflect a more liberal attitude towards Islam, but also show that the term "liberal" is relational, not so much a strictly defined category. She defines herself as liberal in relation to more conservative girls on campus.

"I think there are so many things wrong with the Qur'an, just like there are with so many religions. There are so many interpretations." Sagarika described that her upbringing severely informed the way she thought about Islam. "My parents were liberal and were really focused on our education. They wanted me to be religious but they never forced it down my throat. They weren't extreme. They let us decide." Sagarika had a tutor who taught her Arabic and how to read the Qur'an, which is common among South Asian countries. Though she feels equipped and internally satisfied with her own religious practice, she acknowledges, that visibly there are boundaries drawn between her and conservative Muslims. "I do feel judged sometimes. I mean I don't cover." Sagarika described that there was a visual way of looking Muslim, which is sometimes used to differentiate between conservative and

liberal Muslims. "Often times people don't even think I'm Muslim, they might think I'm Indian or American."

Other students remarked that the hijab was a way that one visually distinguished a liberal Muslim from a conservative one. Hassan, a student at UMass who classifies himself as fairly liberal remarked that he didn't feel comfortable joining the MSA at UMass. "They are known for being pretty conservative. I like to associate with all kinds of people, not necessarily all Muslim," he said. Hassan also described he felt uncomfortable when meeting a girl who wore a hijab. "Sometimes I feel a little scared when I meet a hijabi— I think they're going to judge me and think that I'm too liberal."

Sabeen, an Indian-American girl who grew up as a devout Muslim in Minnesota had remarked publicly at a meeting where all attendants were *hijab* wearing, "I feel judged for not wearing a hijab." An imam who was present at the event later remarked to her in private, "If I had to choose between wearing a hijab and having bad character and not wearing a hijab and having good character, I would choose not wearing a hijab." These vignettes demonstrate that the issue is of hijab does not only mark a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also can be a boundary between Muslims.

Ethnic / Racial Boundaries

Though Muslims are quick to mute their differences, they are also adamant about keeping ethnic boundaries. These groups are the largest among

the American population of Muslims and thus Muslims tend to group

individual under these larger ethnic categories. South Asians are grouped into

one category, with Arabs put against them. African American Muslims are put

into another separate category and are often viewed as inauthentic Muslim in

the eyes of Arab and South Asian Muslims. Afya, the African American

Muslim from New York City expressed she had experienced discrimination in

some cases as not being seen as authentically Muslim.

> Before I came to Smith, I was timid. I was always thinking would I be
> accepted? What do I have in common with an international student
> from Pakistan? Would I be accepted as a `real Muslim'? In New York,
> sometimes you say *salaam* to people on the street and they will ignore
> you. There are people that think that all Muslims are from the Middle
> East.

Afya's experience as being discriminated as not a "true" Muslim by some,

exemplifies how tied Muslim and ethnic identity is in the minds of both

Muslims and non-Muslims. Many converts I spoke with expressed a similar

anxiety and shared experiences of being "seen" as not fully Muslim. I expand

upon this later under the Progressive Muslim section.

Jamillah Karim's ethnography among Muslims in the metropolitan

locations of Atlanta and Chicago examined the way in which Muslims

negotiated between race, class and gender. One of the main arguments on her

seminal work was that Muslims negotiate interactions within the ummah

based on broader societal realities outside of it. "The Chicago ummah assumes

an ethnic geography mirroring the broader society" (2009:53) The mosques

and neighborhoods in the United States tend to be segregated especially by

larger cultural groups: South Asian, Arabs, and Blacks and thus prior to the college environment, many students are only subject to a very particular cultural tradition of Islam. In the college environment many of these traditions meet, and are thus a point of difference. However, the students also act under the ideologies of college multiculturalism. This causes a dual identification within one ethnic group as part of a larger Muslim group. At many points, Muslims will brush over differences, however in some cases, traditions and visual distinctions present boundaries between these Muslims.

One of the instances where boundaries are drawn is on the topic of marriage. Most students remarked that it was important not only to marry a Muslim, but also that who they married had to be of the same ethnic origin. "It's important to my family, it's in my culture," Sabeena remarked, "I have to marry an Indian Muslim, there is no ways around it, I've never thought about it any other way."

Afya described an Arab and Muslim friend that she had in middle school who decided to take off the hijab after September 11th to avoid discrimination. "In middle school I had a friend that after September 11th decided to take off the hijab." Afya who is African American and wears her hijab a way that looks more like African style head wrap says she is not always seen as a Muslim. "I don't look like the people they show on TV, I don't wear traditional clothes," she acknowledged.

Afya said she learned from her experience at Smith that there was a

line between religion and culture. "I learned that I was putting thing into one category, but there are cultural things and there is religion. That has to do with your culture."

This distinction between religion and culture was a common claim among many of my informants who talked of a pure Islam, which was only clouded by cultural traditions. The pure and ideal form of Islam for them was what was dictated in the Qur'an. Though this may seem like a clear distinction, different people drew the boundary between religion and culture at different places. Asmae, an immigrant from Egypt who was a leader among the Roxbury community had remarked, "South Asians don't believe that the *hijab* is mandatory, but it is according to the Hadith." Such an instance runs counter to the culture versus religion beliefs, in which there are multiple ways to practice Islam, none of which is better than another. By adhering to a specific practice, individuals believe that their specific practice is in fact, correct.

American-ness

In addition, the liberal and conservative dichotomy is often intertwined with a national identity. For Uzma, a student from Pakistan, becoming too liberal was equated with becoming too Western and too American. "I have a choice. I could live here; I have family here and my parents don't care, but I'm going to go back to Pakistan. I don't want my kids having two identities. I'm going to make them live in one culture. We laugh at those people, we call

them American born confused desis, ABCD's. They have their parents telling them you have to act like a Pakistani but they live in American culture and are pulled all different directions." When Uzma talks about American culture, she links American-ness with being secular, losing one's modesty, going to parties and having difficulty acting like a proper Muslim. She believes the United States presents more temptations for Muslims and for maintaining an ethnic identity as Pakistani amongst the variety of directions that American society offers.

Nadya, a Pakistani international student also noted a distinction between American and international Muslim students. "I think that American Muslims tend to be more connected to the community because they feel a need to connect with their heritage, they need a place to learn about their religion." Nadya remarked that she did not feel the need to connect to a community the way so many of my informants described in Chapter 1 did. Zehra, another Pakistani student felt the same way, "for me being Muslim is more of a cultural identity for me—I am not very religious."

For many international students, they see college as an opportunity to break out of Islamic rules. "There are also a lot of international students here who come and feel very liberated in this environment. You either become more religious or you become more liberal. You start partying, experimenting." Zahraa observed.

At an event meant to unite the Five College Muslim community, a

group of Pakistani students showed up at an event and saw that the room had been split in between men and women. "This is too traditional," one of the students remarked. In conversation with some of the Muslim students they felt that there was a tendency among American Muslims to be more conservative. "They are trying to hold onto their identity, so they end up becoming more conservative."

Progressive Muslims

On the furthest end of the scale in the eyes of conservative Muslim are progressive Muslims. "The problem with the word progressive, is that it means different things to do different people," Alex Collins said to me in an interview. I had found Alex online, through meetup.com, in a posting he put out to attract people to join the Progressive community.

Alex Power is a 40 year old white gay male. He wears glasses, is sports a balding head of grey and white hair and does not embody anything that is usually indicated by the word Muslim. A liberal, Florida native, and raised Catholic, Alex was attracted to Islam for similar reasons that we saw in the conversions of Hamza and Matt. "The theology just made more sense than the religion that I was brought up in. I was really attracted to the idea around it, not so much the practice."

> My mother was an ESL teacher and always was an appreciator of diversity. I grew up among a lot of foreign students and always tended to be interested in religion. At 15 I had this powerful sense of religious calling, to pursue the truth so I started researching. I

interrogated people, I met people from Morocco. They told me, "you need to go to the library and read. Anything we tell you will be flawed. So I went to the library and began reading and I felt the Koran was speaking o me, it was direct and seemed true—and this was a turning point. I talked with students and they took me to a local mosque.

After deciding to convert at age 15, his religion was also supplemented by his involvement in a Muslim community. "I think when you convert you always are attracted to the most organized, most visible community." Alex became involved with the MSA at his undergraduate education, which was always comprised of Muslims of "ethnic" backgrounds such as Lebanese, Pakistani, Jordanian. The mosques that he attended in his early years were funded by Arabic countries and tended to be more conservative. Alex said that because of his exposure within this type of community his original conversion into Islam was very practice-oriented. However what separates Alex from Hamza and Matt is that after his initial initiation in a conservative setting, he traveled to Morocco.

> It was really interesting coming from a conservative background, very God oriented traditional practice. When I moved to Morocco for a few years, I thought that I would find it to be a paradise, there would be no problems with practicing my religion because I was going to a Muslim country. I thought there would be no obstacles but that's not what I found. I found there was a range of ways to be Muslim. I was put off from being so religious; it opened up my mind.

In Morocco, Alex was exposed to a diverse range of ways of being Muslim. He began using the Internet to connect with other Muslims, discussing how they viewed Islam. Alex describes his internet community as being pivotal in his transformation to a more progressive Muslim. "The

Internet allowed me to connect with Muslims that had the same view points as me. The internet was there to connect with other Progressive Muslims."

The word Progressive claims a capital P because has been an organized movement within the United States. In 1988-99, Alex became involved with a group of queer Muslims who formed an organization called Al-Fatiha, named after the first chapter in the Qur'an, "The Opening." The founder of the group started an email list for gay Muslims. Despite the negative feedback from the conservative mosques he sent the email out to, after a day hundreds of gay Muslims responded to the announcement. In Fall 1998, Al Fatiha had their first physical meeting in DC. Fall '98 Conference in Boston. Alex was a part of the advisory board.

The commonality among Progressive Muslims is a re-interpretation of Islamic thought in relation to modern society. "In religious law I always try to see what's the logic behind it, instead of reading it word for word." Alex's views and the work of the Muslims for Progressive Values signify new interpretations of the Qur'an on subjects such as homosexuality and women's rights. In Islamic tradition, women are often separated spatially for the reason of focusing on Allah. Alex described, "some women enjoy the privacy, so there is a question of how do you move to something more inclusive without infringing on people's privacy or comfortability? At one of the conferences last year they had men on one side, women on another, and people who didn't mind being mixed in the middle."

They progressives do not see these movements as straying away from Islam at all. Alex described, "Mohammed said, 'the most learned person should lead the prayer, it shouldn't be surprising that in some cases that can be a woman.'" Women are able to claim authority in these new spaces as knowledgeable and equals with men.

When I asked him if he thought that there were boundaries within the American Muslim community he responded, "Yes, there is definitely many boundaries that are drawn. Being gay, being white—these are seen as obstacles to being an authentic Muslim." At one point in Morocco he was barred from going to a mosque because they didn't believe he was Muslim. During a guest lecture at Cornell, the campus' MSA protested his appearance on campus. "Half of the audience was from the LGBT org that brought me there and the other half were enraged Muslims who were hostile." In 2001, Al-Muhajiroun, an international organization who works towards establishing a global Islamic caliphate, issued a fatwa declaring that all members of Al-Fatiha were *murtadd,* or apostates, and condemned them to death. Because of the threat and the negative reactions from many conservative Muslims, many members of the foundation's site still prefer to be anonymous to protect their identity. Alex has received some death threats.

Being a White Muslim

The meetings for the progressive Muslims are small and comprised of white Muslims. Despite this solidarity between progressives, there is a sense that Progressives are further minorities among ethnic Muslims, which can have both positive and negative impacts. At a recent meeting one of the members of the Progressive Muslims group reflected, "Someone who is an ethnic Muslim might have a problem getting a job, but someone would probably not know that I'm Muslim, so in a way I have a privilege, but [my ethnicity] also lends myself to being discriminated against among Muslims." Rachel, the white convert from California told me she also felt discriminated against sometimes among ethnic Muslims. "They look at me and think why am I wearing this thing on my head? I'm just a white girl with blue eyes, no way I can be Muslim. They are usually surprised when they find out how much I know about Islam."

Matt, the convert from Amherst, spoke positively about being a white Muslim. "I am White American, but I'm also Muslim—and so I'm almost an ambassador. It's almost a responsibility to put myself out there, help people connect, and improve understanding. I don't have any cultural baggage. I hang out with Pakistanis, black Muslims, whoever—I can go across cultures. If you don't have that, you're going to drown."

Among these descriptions of boundaries drawn between Muslims is a lurking discourse of drowning, or losing one's identity or heritage. The

keyword identity was always brought up throughout my research, despite my attempts to avoid asking about "one's identity." In this way, in the midst of America's individualist and tendency towards psychological diagnoses, identity has become something needing to be held onto and needing to survive throughout the "noise" of the many contexts that people go through in their lives. Despite these fears, it is these boundaries that have become an essential in the creation of their identities. People regard themselves in relation to one another and through their categorizations they make themselves. These boundaries and thus important not only in understanding the complications of the interactions that form Muslim identity, but they are also integral to understanding categories and lines drawn in identity formation in the contemporary world more broadly.

CONCLUSION

On a Friday morning in February I left Western Massachusetts to attend the MAS Boston retreat in the New Hampshire woods I described in Chapter 2. I boarded a Peter Pan bus to Boston and transferred to the commuter train to Roxbury. After the directions on Google maps failed me, I looked up to try and find where I was going amid the urban cityscape. Distinct from the outlines of buildings on the horizon, I recognized four brick minarets which mirrored the picture I had seen on the mosque website. As I approached the mosque, I saw *hijabi* girls with backpacks entering and was reassured I was going to the right place. I entered the mosque, took my shoes off and approached a young girl and asked, "Is this where we meet for the retreat?" The girl assured me I had come to the right place and we sat in the corner of the café at the mosque, talking about ordinary college topics: majors, cities of origins and dorm life. In the midst of our conversation, I looked up to see *Al-Jazeera* projected on a large screen, the scrolling headline read, "Mubarak steps down from Presidency." The girls I was sitting with were of Egyptian descent and expressed that they were very happy to hear about the new freedom. "I can't believe it, it's a great day," Meera, a native New Yorker said.

Throughout the weekend of the retreat, there was a celebratory air, which filled the cabins and auditorium where we made the prayers due to the Egyptian victory, despite that out of the hundred attendees, perhaps a dozen were from Egypt or of Egyptian descent. "We are all Egyptian today," said one of the retreat organizers during a welcome speech to the event. This celebratory nature reflects how these youth have created a sort of creolized identity among their community blending their multiple ethnicities into one. They see the Muslim identity as a sisterhood/brotherhood, call one another "brother" or "sister" and see themselves as unified by a Muslim identity, while also engaging in discussion about differences, heritage and tradition.

Throughout the weekend I saw some wear T-shirts with the Egyptian flag and later on I saw many post victorious liberation messages on their Facebook statuses. Many of them participated in demonstrations in support of the Egyptians and now the Libyans, as they see the fight for freedom in the Middle East as a shared endeavor, blurring the national boundaries that might have divided them as citizens of Algeria, Morocco, and Syria to a more panethnic Muslim identity. This creolization is not always invoked, as there are also many points at which differences are discussed and made visible. The virtuosity that is exemplified in their knowledge of nationalistic differences reflects maintenance of ethnic boundaries despite their prevalent discourses of

the *ummah,* brotherhood and sisterhood. This simultaneous maintenance of a larger panethnic identity with smaller nationalistic or sub-ethnic identities is similar to the panethnic labels attributed within the Asian American community (Espiritu 1992).

This vignette is a final attempt to illustrate the complications involved in American Muslim belonging, as it is intertwined with political allegiances and national identity. These people are Muslim, students, Americans, and world citizens. In some cases, some of these labels matter more than the others and in other situations they do not. This situational identity and belonging is always negotiated within the increased flows of media, flows of people and ideas (Appadurai 1996).

This thesis has been an attempt to bridge this literature on the global, by focusing on the local and specific lives of my informants as they negotiate within American discourses, ideas of ethnicity, conservatism, technology and more. This study in turn squashes the unproductive and misleading dichotomy between the local and the global, turning the distinction on its head—as national categorizations and homogenizing religious identities cannot account for the complex ways that the self is negotiated in contemporary times. Throughout the paper, I have highlighted the ways in which Muslim negotiate their identities and practice amongst secular and multicultural environments and discourse, which has in no way created a clean representation of

American Muslims, but instead complicated any fixed notions of what constitutes Islam reinforcing the theoretical but highly experiential claim that American Muslim identity is situational and complicated.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed a variety of narratives and paths to becoming and being Muslim in the United States. What however unites the diverse body of narratives I have presented was an assertion that the individual navigates the American Muslim Identity. Surely this emphasis on the individual in the construction of religious identity and practice is an effect of a general individualist philosophy in the United States. This individualist mentality and philosophy is only reified in my informants' participation in productions of identity in the multiple arenas I have discussed.

Their use of individualized technology, production of presentations and maintenance of boundary lines and labels between themselves and others are all practices which simultaneously define the self as a individualized entity while also solidifying an "American Muslim identity." Their emphasis on freedom and choice is most likely a reaction to dominant rhetorics, which posit that Muslims are homogenous and oppressed by a strict religious philosophy.

These simultaneous reifications of the self and belonging to a larger group is representative of larger ways of identity construction in the contemporary world. Muslim identity operates in relation with Christian, Jewish and secular identities and is also intertwined with ethnic, gender, and

class identities. This thesis has touched on a great variety of issues and this I acknowledge there is enormous room for further study in addressing the ways these multiple identities interact. Such research is vital for problematizing the multiple layers of seemingly fixed and essential identities.

I hope that the case study of the intellectual environment of the college campus would stand as a model for the complex ideologies that religion interacts with. The *Knowledge* chapter outlined the way that the new forms and mediums which sacred text has taken has changed Muslims' imagining and engagement with Allah himself. In *Presentations* I showed how Muslims are working to construct a voice for Islam to combat negative, violent images, which dominate the public sphere and thus participate in the interfaith continuum and movement which is spreading through America. *Boundaries* complicated the humanist and universalist imagery that Muslims try to present, by highlighting the boundaries that they themselves draw in particular contexts.

My research found that American Muslims are engaged in complex negotiations in many aspects of their lives. They are not bounded by the Qur'an, some top down citizenship that dictates their cultural belonging, or images that are perpetuated in the public sphere. Instead their engagements exemplify the agency they possess in constructing their own religion to fit within contemporary life, through new media practice and application of Islamic principles outside the domains of traditionally "religious" spaces. I

have had a particular anxiety throughout this research process in representing "American Islam" accurately and at the end of this project I still feel that the story is incomplete. There is always more research to do, people to interview, issues to investigate—but what I can conclude is that Islam, Muslims and religion more broadly cannot be sequestered into the corner as a fixed entity. We must continue to study the ways in which religion will interact with other aspects of social life. Such research can further complicate the categories, which keep people ignorant of realities outside their own.

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