

**FINDING MECCA IN AMERICA:  
AMERICAN MUSLIMS AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP**

**by**

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**“tuba lil guraba”**

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## GLOSSARY

**adhan** the call to prayer

**darura** desperate circumstances; in times of *darura* the forbidden may become lawful

**dawah** proselytizing

**eid** major religious holiday. There are two *eids*, one marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan and the other coinciding with the culmination of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca

**fatwa** a legal opinion issued by an Islamic jurist, generally in response to a question and tailored to the circumstances of the inquirer

**fiqh** Islamic law as it pertains to mundane affairs; the Islamic legal heritage

**halal/haram** religiously permissible/impermissible; may apply to food, activities, etc.

**hajj** pilgrimage to Mecca

**hijra** originally the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution; by extension, emigration for a religious purpose

**imam** the leader of a Muslim congregation; an *imam* may be a spiritual leader comparable to a pastor, but can be anyone competent to lead others in prayer

**jihād** struggle against oppression; may refer either to armed resistance or to spiritual self-improvement

**juma** congregational prayer, held on Fridays at midday

**khutbah** sermon

**madhhab** one of the five schools of Islamic jurisprudence

**masjid** mosque

**mihrab** a niche in the wall of a mosque used to indicate the direction of prayer

**muezzin** the person who gives the call to prayer

**qibla** the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslims turn to pray

**sharia** Islamic law in the most general sense, closely identified with divine revelation; extends to questions of ethics, ritual practice, and civil and criminal law

**Shia/Sunni** the two main sects of Islam. Sunni tradition places emphasis on the Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries as ethical exemplars; Shia tradition emphasizes reverence for the Prophet's descendants.

**ummah** the worldwide community of Muslims

**ulama** Islamic scholars collectively; one scholar is an *alim*

## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the experience of Muslim identity in the United States. It explores the various encounters between Muslim life and American forms. It pays particular attention to the processes of cultural settlement of Muslims and their post-9/11 citizenship practices. Arguing that there has been a growing disjuncture between the nation and the state since 9/11, I ask how Muslims respond to this disjuncture which threatens to leave them outside the definition of the nation while still remaining inside the state. How do they remake boundaries so as to include themselves in the nation? Focusing on the relationship between religious identity and cultural citizenship, my multi-site ethnographic research explores various boundary works: the process of boundary-crossing where Islam is translated into another language, culture and even geography and the process of boundary-shifting where Muslim demand for recognition takes the form of multiple citizenship practices such as civil rights advocacy, interfaith activism and Muslim ethnic comedy. My dissertation also explores the ways in which 9/11 has encouraged the formation of a distinct American Islam.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Muslim Life and American Forms

Imagine that you are reading today's *New York Times*. As you begin to turn the pages, you notice that a great many of the stories have to do with Islam or Muslims. The reason Muslims get so much coverage these days is obvious. What is not immediately apparent, however, is that there are in fact two kinds of stories. The first has to do with Muslims overseas, who enter the American public's imagination in the context of war and terror, or to use the official nomenclature, "the war on terror." This type of news has recently come to dominate the pages of the *Times*. Totally unknown places like Sadr City, Basra, Falluja and Kabul are now part of everyday American consciousness. In these stories Muslims appear as enemies, as troublemakers, or at best as friendly natives. These international news stories deal with Muslims and Islam in their externality to American culture and geography.

You also come across stories belonging to a new genre of news about Muslims. These articles, still rather infrequent in comparison with the first type, are of an entirely different quality: they are stories about Muslims *in America*. The Muslims in these pieces appear either as suspects of terrorism (which puts them back into the first category of news) or— more often— as victims of the violation of rights. This second group of

Muslims is generally represented as next-door neighbors or decent Americans, people who are struggling for their civil rights and are in need of empathy, understanding and respect.

In 2006, the *New York Times* assigned its first-ever correspondent for American Muslim affairs. The correspondent, Neil MacFarquhar, a veteran foreign correspondent reporting on the Muslim world, moved from Cairo to San Francisco to begin covering the affairs of domestic Muslims (*National Public Radio*, 04/13/2006). Then in 2007 Andrea Elliott, another *Times* reporter, won a Pulitzer Prize for her three-part series of articles, “An Imam in America.” Published in March 2006, the articles in the series each covered more than two pages of the paper and were enthusiastically welcomed by the Muslim community. The *New York Times* itself reported that the series received wide acclaim both inside and outside the Muslim community (NYT, 04/17/2007).

The curiosity about Muslims in the United States is not limited to the pages of the *New York Times*. It is shared by neighbors and co-workers, as well as by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. This interest is a mixture of fear and fascination. For a whole range of reasons, people wonder what it is like to be Muslim in America. The events of September 11, 2001 (henceforth 9/11) had a deep impact on American society, but a deeper one on Muslims living within it. Once practically invisible, they suddenly found themselves overexposed. Muslim membership in American society became more complicated. Are they terrorists? If they are decent citizens, how do they live their lives since 9/11? Today such questions are constantly asked, explicitly or implicitly, in everyday encounters, in policy circles, and in government agencies. In this dissertation, I ask similar questions as I explore the experience of being Muslim in America, both

before and after 9/11. And since 9/11 has imposed itself on public discourse as the threshold of a new era, let me also start with the impact of this turning point in our recent history.

### **The Shrinkage of Nation: 9/11 As Neurosis**

The impact of 9/11 on the American psyche has been described as a “cultural trauma” (Smelser 2004: 265, Alexander 2004). In a pioneering study, Kai Erikson approached the collective experience of trauma as a form of shock with “a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (Erikson 1976: 153). I prefer to use collective neurosis instead of cultural or collective trauma, because it better expresses the alienation from a part of the social body. Neurosis is a state “in which the boundary between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly. There are cases in which parts of a person’s own body...appear alien to him and as not belonging to his ego.” (Freud 1961: 13). The collective neurosis triggered by the traumatic events of 9/11 resulted in the release of collective psychosocial energies—patriotism and a resurgent nativism. It was expressed through a new emphasis on flags, the English language, and border security. The nation’s borders, both internal and external, were re-deployed: they were “tightened” and “hardened.” An overall sense of Durkheimian *collective effervescence* gave rise to nationalism in general and Islamophobia in particular. A shrinking nation produced an alien part within its own body.

This heightened sense of “one nation under threat,” reinforced in the ensuing years by government policies (Howell and Shryock 2003), created a disjuncture between the state and the nation—or to put it differently, a withdrawal from *demos* to *ethnos* (Balibar 2004: 9, Habermas 1998: 129). A nation that was, at least theoretically, *divided* into citizens with equal rights and responsibilities was gradually transformed into a nation that was *united* (“united we stand”). Certain distinctions between the public and private spheres evaporated. Even the resistance to erosions of civil rights had to be formulated in the language of patriotism, as attested by the common bumper sticker: “Dissent is patriotic!”

Once the assumed congruence between nation and state was lost, a shrinking nation left behind an abandoned space that was inside the state and yet outside the nation. Rules and regulations that had been directed outward—and from which the nation’s interior had been mostly exempt—now entered the domestic space. As a result, instruments of security once part of the exterior of the state were turned inwards. Post-9/11 America witnessed the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, the Patriot Acts, and the merging of agencies of domestic and foreign intelligence. Spying became internal surveillance, defense became security, kidnapping became detention, and arbitrary acts became “executive decisions” beyond the reach of law, justified by such terms as “security risk” or “national security.” The state was cleansed of those outside the nation by means of denationalization, deportation, and rendition. The interests of the nation took priority over the law of the state. What happened was, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation [...]; the nation had conquered the state.” (Arendt 1973: 275).

Some people, even if they had full legal citizenship, suddenly came to be seen as cultural aliens. In short, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 created a new situation where Muslims who were inside the state now found themselves outside the nation. At the height of the panic, as the disjuncture between the state and the nation started to grow, many Muslims who were citizens or residents considered changing their names, and some of them did, as a way of smuggling themselves back into the nation. They wanted to avoid becoming victims of the nation's wrath (e.g., discrimination in employment). Muslims—who were still protected by the state and its legal structures—no longer felt themselves protected by the nation and its public sentiment. This loss of membership in the nation is crucial for understanding what it means to be a Muslim citizen of the United States after 9/11.

The impact of 9/11 on the surface of American society is in effect an ethno-quake. This tectonic shock to the social landscape produced a crack which left Muslims as a group exposed. The status of Muslims suddenly changed from invisible strangers to highly visible strangers.

So where should one begin an investigation aimed at understanding the experience of being Muslim in America? I believe a good place to start is the airport. Muslim identity entered the American public imagination—forcibly—through airplanes and airports. Since then airports have become an interface between Muslim lives and American law and public. Not only do all citizens feel the consequences of 9/11 most immediately at the airport, but more importantly, the airport has become the ultimate site of Muslim visibility (Figure 1.1.).



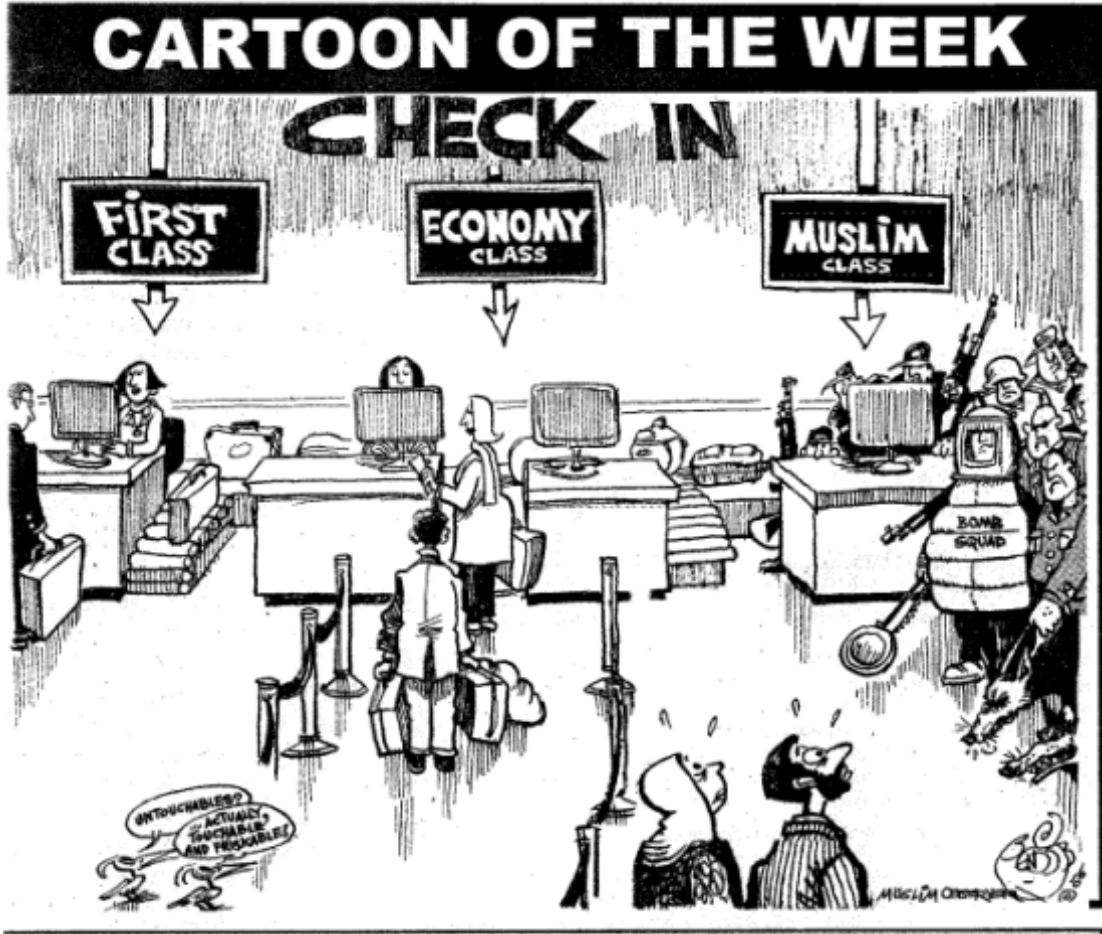


Figure 1.1: Muslims at the airport. Cartoon by Khalil Bendib, *The Muslim Observer*, August 31-September 6, 2006.

### At the Airport

Airports have become an interesting space for Muslim identity. As a space of transition, the airport is a liminal place. With its strict rules and rites of passage, it has all the characteristics of a threshold place (Gottdiener 2007: 11). The airport is an entry and exit point to and from the nation-state. It represents the edge of the nation. It is a ritualized border, where various forms of surveillance and control are exerted. Especially since 9/11, widespread anxiety about aviation security, ever-more-intrusive screening procedures, and the creation of no-fly lists all give rise to “societies of control,” a

condition Deleuze imagined to be the next stage of surveillance after Foucault's disciplinary society (Deleuze 1992: 3-7). The airport thus provides a condensed version of the surveillance and control carried out by the "safety state" (Lyon 2003). It is at this site of passage that Muslim visibility and anxiety reach new heights.

An airport, then, is the site *par excellence* for observing the impact of 9/11 on Muslim lives in America. At the airport the relationship between Muslim identity and American sovereignty comes into the open. Many reported Muslim civil rights violations and a significant portion of everyday Muslim conversation revolve around anecdotes about airport experiences. Muslims are surprised when they are not selected for random search on a given trip. People jokingly say that driving while black has been replaced by flying while Muslim.

Muslims experience the disjuncture between the nation and the state that I described above most directly at the airport. If elsewhere the disjuncture was an implicit condition, it becomes explicit when a person with a distinctly Muslim appearance walks into the airport. Someone who so far (in the city, at the ticket counter, etc.) has been treated casually and equally, suddenly becomes suspect. Before they enter the airport they may be outside the definition of the nation, but they are still protected by the law; that is, still inside the state. But when they walk into the airport— where internal and external meet and where external borders are now internalized— they sense their protected status beginning to evaporate. Even those Muslims who do not consider themselves particularly profiled or discriminated against in everyday life suddenly begin to feel uneasy at the airport. Citizens are asked to report suspicious behavior or persons. The state of alert now expected of all travelers is experienced most intensely by Muslim passengers, exhausted

by too much self-awareness. At the airport human beings are stripped of their language along with their shoes. From the electromagnetic point of view, they become completely naked. The distinction between public and private is partly suspended as security personnel fumble with previously sacrosanct bodies. Strip searches and other security rites of passage show people the “hard edge of the nation” (Bosniak 2006: 4). In short, at the airport, Muslims come face to face with the nation beyond the protections of the state. Close questioning by security agents who are trained to detect inappropriate emotional reactions (Salter 2007: 49) and scrutiny of travelers’ faces for signs of ill intent are both particularly interesting aspects of the airport experience. At the airport, both speech (logos) and expression (the face)—which philosopher Emmanuel Levinas famously interpreted as the source of unpredictability and transcendence—meet the pressures of objectification and control.

A striking outcome of the securitization of society is the ban on jokes at the airport. Making jokes in the security check area is strictly prohibited. An interesting outgrowth of this is the attempt on the part of Muslim ethnic comedians to turn the stage into a symbolic airport (see Chapter 7). Not only do they draw much of their material from their airport experiences, but some literally enter the stage with a simulated ritual of passing through metal detectors and being frisked by mock TSA staff. The turning of airports into no-joke zones and the turning of the Muslim comic zone into a symbolic airport are two symptoms of the same collective neurosis. At one and the same time, 9/11 has produced fear and laughter, Islamophobia and Muslim comedy, exclusion and visibility.

Part of this study deals with the ways in which Muslims undo exclusion by turning their newfound visibility to their advantage. I consider some of the ways they try to bridge the gap opened between themselves and the rest of American society as a result of collective neurosis. Since 9/11 Muslims have realized that it is not their Islamic identity but their American citizenship that is at risk.

This dissertation divides into two parts: the first half deals with Muslim anxieties about their Islamic identity in an American environment, the second with anxieties about the potential loss of their American citizenship. My discussion draws attention particularly to the cultural aspects of membership in American society at a time of crisis.

### **In Search of Cultural Citizenship**

The exclusion against which Muslims struggle is marked by its particular time and place, but reveals the complexity and contentious nature of citizenship in general. What is citizenship? And what do I mean by “cultural citizenship” as a specific dimension of citizenship that American Muslims seek to acquire? A collection of rights and obligations that shape membership in a polity, citizenship offers universality and equality to its insiders and closure and exclusion to its outsiders. Its origins can be traced back to Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, with their respective republican (practice-based) and liberal (status-based) traditions. Approaching citizenship as a mode of incorporating excluded groups is a horizon opened by T. H. Marshall in his groundbreaking treatise, *Citizenship and Social Class* (1964, first published in 1950). As a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, citizenship is a product of struggles among various political, social, economic and cultural groups. American citizenship in particular

has always been a politically charged and contested status (Smith 1997: 14). The concept of citizenship in general covers an extremely wide spectrum of conditions and practices. After examining Marshall's contribution to our understanding of citizenship, I will focus on its cultural dimension under the rubric of "cultural citizenship."

Marshall identifies three dimensions of citizenship—civil, political and social. Civil citizenship refers to the legal rights developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in response to absolutism. It is institutionalized in the right of *habeas corpus*. Political citizenship describes the right to participate in the exercise of power. Developed with the emergence of parliamentary democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, political citizenship refers to the right to vote, the right to freedom of association, etc. The third dimension of citizenship, social citizenship, emerged in the twentieth century and went beyond the conventional notion that membership in a community is predominantly a political matter (Shafir 1998: 13). What was still lacking was a means of transforming social hierarchies towards egalitarianism. Social citizenship, thus, takes aim at the problem of exclusion generated by the tension between citizenship's promise of universal equality and the social inequality produced by market forces (Somers 2008: 9). Marshall saw *social* citizenship as a correction not so much to material inequalities but to status inequality.

By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society (Marshall 1964: 8).

“Citizenship requires a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to a civilisation which is a common possession” (Marshall 1964: 24). At first reading it may seem to suggest that citizenship entails one common culture (civilization) to which loyalty is asked (Hindess 1993: 26). But Marshall’s conception of common culture is not a fixed, exclusive one. Rather, common culture remains substantially open and unspecified, characterized largely by its connection with the sense of equality (Marshall 1964: 18). What is common will be decided in part by the groups to be included. Therefore, social citizenship represents a successful transcendence not only of juridical notions of citizenship, but also of the distinction between its liberal and republican conceptions.

Marshall places the idea of human dignity at the core of citizenship because he recognizes that “equality of status is more important than equality of income” (Marshall 1964: 33). Social citizenship, as articulated by Marshall and echoed by Judith Shklar (1991: 2, 19), is primarily a matter of “social standing” and recognition. It thus refers to “the human right to the dignity of social inclusion and recognition as full members of a political and social community” (Somers 2008: 8, 37). Although the three dimensions of citizenship evolved historically in a certain order, no teleology should be assumed in their appearance and potential demise.

At the time Marshall conceptualized social citizenship, societies were less heterogenous. Today large-scale processes of globalization and immigration have altered the character of liberal democratic societies. Proliferation of new identities and diversification of needs have justified Marshall’s emphasis on inclusion, recognition and dignity as the core issues of citizenship. They have also given rise to a literature that

focuses on citizenship from the point of view of identity politics (Kymlicka 1998, Isin and Wood 1999).

The identity dimension of citizenship and has been approached differently in different contexts, from the European unification process (Delgado-Moreira 1997) to Asian and Latino immigrant communities in the United States (Ong 1996, Rosaldo 1997). Cultural citizenship is also invoked in relation to the rights of sexual minorities (Pakulski 1997).

Given the emphasis it places on human *dignity* and *recognition*, the concept of cultural citizenship can be seen as a deepening of Marshall's social citizenship (Taylor 1994). It may also constitute a fourth generation or new dimension of citizenship which "involves the right to be different, to re-value stigmatized identities, to embrace openly and legitimately hitherto marginalized lifestyles and to propagate them without hindrance" (Pakulski 1997: 83). Here the emphasis is on the symbolic and ideational sphere. Pakulski describes a set of principles that characterize cultural citizenship: the right to symbolic presence, dignifying representation and maintenance of a different lifestyle. These are deployed against marginalization, stigmatization and assimilation.

An important implication of cultural citizenship is that the demand for dignity, recognition and equality is pursued with respect to a more elusive excluder, the public/nation rather than the state/law. Like social citizenship, cultural citizenship refers to citizenship practices that aim to bridge the gap between legal citizenship and full membership in a polity, with a particular emphasis on the psychic and symbolic dimensions of the membership process.

In my discussion I approach the cultural citizenship of American Muslims within Pakulski's framework, which locates the avenues of citizenship in multiple sites including not only the state, but also public sentiment or the nation in general. Following Somers' conceptualization, I also treat citizenship as an "instituted process" (Somers 2008: 28). To say that citizenship is a process is to indicate its temporality and openness. To say that it is instituted is to indicate its historicity. That is, citizenship is historical in the sense that it does not spring from any presumed "nature" or essence. It exists as a set of practices only to the extent that those practices congeal into enduring yet fragile institutions of rights.

### **American Muslims: Between Exclusion and Overexposure**

It is now time to answer a question that I put on hold in the previous pages: who are the American Muslims? What does American Islam look like? Perhaps I should start with a local answer to this global question. After all, this study draws on research most of which was conducted in Detroit, a microcosm of Islam in America. It is also the birthplace of various Muslim movements and institutions. Detroit is home to the first mosque in America. It is the birthplace of the Nation of Islam. As in the rest of America, the majority of Muslims are immigrants to Detroit, but the story of Islam is not exclusively a story of immigration. Large African American convert communities are an important part of the Muslim landscape in America. One can easily both find first- and third-generation immigrants, converts and mosques.

Islam in Detroit, as in all America, is divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, time of immigration, language competence, and sect. Detroit's first mosque was



established in Highland Park in 1921 by Lebanese Sunni immigrants. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq led the first prayer at the Highland Park mosque and gave a historic speech which was reported by Detroit News under the heading “City’s Mohammedans Open New Mosque, First in U.S.” (*Detroit News*, June 9, 1921). Missionaries from the heterodox Ahmadiyya Movement of India arrived in Detroit around the same time. And in 1930 the Nation of Islam, started by Wallace D. Fard and led until 1975 by Elijah Muhammad, opened its first “temple” in Detroit.

Dearborn and the metro Detroit area have seen several influxes of refugees. In the first quarter of the century they were mostly economic refugees leaving the Ottoman province of Syria. Later Palestinian and Lebanese refugees came to the region fleeing regional and civil wars. More recently, waves of Bosnian and Iraqi refugees, and Yemeni, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants have all settled in the area. And the list could be extended. Suffice it to say that one can find in Detroit both Albanians, one of the oldest communities, and Senegalese Africans, among the newest. Some of these communities are Shia, others are Sunni. Some are inner-city mosques, some are suburban. An extensive documentation of this mosques has been produced by *Building Islam in Detroit Project*.<sup>1</sup>

Muslim communities are so diverse that only a few strands unite them: Islam as a religion and the American experience. The question of the incorporation of these different groups into the larger society as Americans is at the same time a question of their articulation of a common identity as “Muslim” among themselves. Common identity

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found at <http://www.dc.umich.edu/dmc/grocs/05/buildingislam.html> .

requires a variety of convergences. One of them is convergence in a common language, both linguistic and cultural.<sup>2</sup>

I was always fascinated by how these communities named their institutions. Let me give just one example to illustrate how factors such as time of immigration, class, and acquisition of English language play out in the symbolic process of self-identification.

Here are the names of three Detroit mosques:

1. Masjid al Tawheed
2. Tawheed Center
3. Unity Center

Masjid al Tawheed is located on Warren Avenue in Detroit and has a congregation made up predominantly of recent Yemeni immigrants. The imam does not speak any English and relies on a translator. He is quite prejudiced against other Muslim groups (Shias in particular) and thinks the best way to live in America as Muslims is to minimize contact with non-Muslim Americans. His community is mostly poor: a number of them drive ice-cream trucks for a living, and you always see a small fleet of them parked behind the mosque at prayer time. The second mosque, Tawheed Center, is located in Farmington Hills, a somewhat more affluent suburb. Its congregation is mostly lower middle class. The mosque has an introverted but not entirely unwelcoming character. Compared to Masjid al Tawheed, they are an older generation of immigrants. Tawheed Center has an ethnically mixed (mostly Arab and South Asian) congregation and is not much involved in interfaith activities. The third mosque, the Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, is located in one of the richest suburbs of Detroit. The congregation is

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<sup>2</sup> In this study, I use the word “Muslim” to refer to individuals whose primary identification is with Islam. The experience of non-religious Muslims is not covered in this work, although their experience might not be very different from that of religious Muslims as far as the impact of 9/11 is concerned.

multiethnic and upper middle class. It includes relatively more established immigrants as well as converts. The orientation of the mosque is very ecumenical, both with respect to Islamic sects and to other faith groups. The leaders of the Unity Center are among the most active Muslims on the Detroit interfaith scene.

Now the interesting thing is that all these mosques actually have the same name. *Tawheed* means “unity” and refers simultaneously to the oneness of God and the unity of the Muslim community. The evolution of a single name—from pure transliterated Arabic (*Masjid al Tawheed*), to a mix of Arabic and English (Tawheed Center), to an entirely anglicized form (Unity Center)—perfectly encapsulates the three mosques’ degrees of internal diversity, time of immigration, involvement in interfaith activities, and overall level of engagement with their American environment.

The density of the Muslim community and diversity of mosque cultures in Detroit makes this area a perfect destination for discovering patterns of community development.

Andrew Shryock observes one such pattern in

the developmental arc of mosque creation which begins with the acquisition of a prayer space, then a move to a house or apartment, then the purchase and refurbishment of an existing structure (a church, a warehouse, an old workshop, a restaurant, a bank), the construction of a mosque “from the ground up,” and finally the establishment of the mosque-school-cultural center, which is now the aspiration of nearly every active mosque community [in Detroit] (Shryock 2007: 7).

The three largest Muslim ethnic groups in the United States (and in Detroit) are Arabs, South Asians and African Americans.<sup>3</sup> About two thirds of Muslims are foreign born. Estimates of the number of Muslims in the United States vary widely. The most

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<sup>3</sup> The percentages for the national scale are South Asians (32%), Arabs (26%), African Americans (20%) and other (22%) (Bukhari 2003: 9).

commonly cited number is 6 million. But it is not a reliable figure.<sup>4</sup> What is agreed upon, however, is that American Muslims are on average better educated and financially better off than their fellow citizens. According to the Pew Research Center's 2007 report, American Muslims are mostly middle class, have moderate views and share mainstream values. The same report also found that a majority of Muslims "believe that it has become more difficult to be a Muslim in the U.S. since 9/11. Most also believe that the government 'singles out' Muslims for increased surveillance and monitoring."

One can observe the growing interest in Islam and Muslims from the shelves of bookstores. The literature on Islam has been growing steadily since 9/11. Some of it can be called alarmist or Islamophobic literature, some are editions of standard religious texts, and others are "Islam for Dummies"-type introductions. Muslims themselves are also producing work in response to the demand for knowledge about Islam.

The classical works on Islam in America are for the most part the work of Islamicists, that is, scholars of Islamic studies (Haddad 2002, Smith 1999, Haddad and Esposito 2000, Haddad and Smith 2002). Most of this early generation of works provides snapshots of the experience of being Muslim in America. Works on Muslim slaves (Austin 1997, Diouf 1998), convert Muslims (Abdallah 2006), and the African American experience (Jackson 2005) are drawing increasing attention. Popular works representing journalistic interest in American Muslims (Abdo 2006, Barrett 2007) share the shelves with a literature of Muslim self-justification and apology. For example, in 2005 when I

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<sup>4</sup> Ever since a *New York Times* article cited 6 million as the number of Muslims in the U.S. (NYT, 02/21/1989), the Muslim population figures have been subject to contestation. Ihsan Bagby's study, *The American Mosque: A National Portrait* (2001), based on a sample of 416 mosques, estimated the Muslim population in the United States to be somewhere between 6 and 7 million. Another study put the estimate at 5.7 million (Ba-Yunus and Kone: 2003: 314). The most commonly cited number of 6 million has recently been severely undercut by the Pew Research Center's study, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. The Pew report (2007) estimated 2.35 million Muslims in the U.S.

walked into a Borders bookstore to check out the new releases, there were two Islam-related books in the storefront display of popular mainstream titles. The first was Khaled Abou El Fadl's *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (2005). The second book was by Cpl. James Yee, the former Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay who was accused of espionage by the US government. After a highly publicized case all the charges against him were dropped. His book's title reflects the tension that gave him both recognition and victimhood: *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire* (2005). My first thought was that this is how Islam enters the mainstream, through apologetics and victimhood. Finally, rounding out the picture is a proliferating literature by Muslim public intellectuals who propose future directions for the community (Khan 2002, Safi 2003, Shakir 2005).

On the academic front, the field of American Muslim studies is a new one and fragmentary at best. Most of the works focus exclusively on immigrant Muslim experiences. The few that deal with the African-American experience tend to treat it separately. Comprehensive, in-depth studies that are grounded in fieldwork are very rare (Moore 1995, Cesari 2004). The increase in ethnographic takes on Muslim experience in America is taking place largely outside the discipline of sociology (Schmidt 2004, Shryock 2004).

Today we see a proliferation of new Muslim practices (e.g., Muslim comedy) and discourses (e.g., Abrahamic discourse) which can be called post-diasporic. The existing literature on American Islam, however, seems stuck in the diasporic moment, still producing snapshots of individual ethnic communities. In this study, I focus on the post-

diasporic moment and the processes of convergence among American Muslims of different backgrounds.

In this dissertation, I approach American Muslims as a religious/cultural minority, paying particular attention to the process of cultural settlement before 9/11 and Muslim citizenship practices after it. I also trace the transformations that take place among the second and third generations of people and institutions that are no longer either immigrant or convert. In this study, I explore aspects of identity formation as a result of a series of boundary work. Identities are produced through various shifts in and contestations over the “symbolic boundaries” that separate “us” from “not us” (Lamont 1992: 9, Zubrzycki 2006: 210). Muslim identity in the United States is an outcome of processes of *boundary crossing* and is engaged in *boundary shifting* (Zolberg and Woon 1999: 8-9). The concept of boundary crossing entails an investigation of the symbolic violence and disorientation experienced by newcomers. The concept of boundary shifting, on the other hand, makes us attentive to the transformative influence that newcomers aspire to have on their host environment. Especially after the exclusion generated by 9/11, how do American Muslims remake boundaries so as to include themselves in the nation? As citizens, how do Muslims try to overcome social exclusion and make the practical boundaries of American identity more congruent with its legal and theoretical universalism?

### **Theoretical Orientations: Cultural Sociology and Phenomenology**

This dissertation is about Muslims and Islam in America. While it has elements of both sociology of religion and immigration studies, it is not covered by either alone. It is

more broadly a study in cultural sociology in the tradition of phenomenology. When carried out phenomenologically, as Berger and Luckmann have suggested (1966), cultural analysis becomes an extended sociology of knowledge that links ideas, values or cultural constructs in general to experience and lifeworld (Joas 2000, Habermas 1987).

My cultural sociology is Simmelian. I am interested in the tension between life and forms, between experience and culture (Weingartner 1960). I find Simmel's "philosophical sociology" (Simmel 1950: 58) and writings on cultural crisis to be full of insights that one cannot find in the mainstream classical sociologists. I complement Simmel's sociological vitalism with the phenomenological tradition.

As an ethnographer, I take seriously the phenomenological maxim, "*I* is the dative of manifestation." What is manifested and what the ethnographer bears witness to by means of his "-graphy" is a series of experiences mediated—and sometimes obscured—by ideal types (Schutz 1967). That is, the reality observed is a combination of ideal types and experiences. Located in a particular place and time, the researcher is acutely aware of his perspectival finitude. The task ahead of him therefore is *interpretation* (Weber 1978, Gadamer 2005). As Robert Wuthnow points out, cultural analysis is essentially an act of interpretation. The "object itself is a cultural construction, subject to the meanings we give it" and thus interpretable in different ways (Wuthnow 1987: 17). Therefore, when correctly understood, phenomenology becomes hermeneutic, that is to say, interpretive (Dreyfus 1991: 32). Heidegger himself redefined phenomenology along those lines when he said "the meaning of phenomenology lies in *interpretation*" (1962: 61). Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to understand life from within the flow of life rather than from the outside.

I am also inclined to call my sociology an agonistic sociology. Agonistic sociology has several sensibilities: these are a) historicization of rationality and attention to the genesis and degeneration of rule (order), b) attention to the agonistic elements (charisma, anomie, exception), and c) sensitivity to temporality.

My interpretive approach to sociology pays attention to the margins rather than the mainstream, to lived experience rather than floating abstractions and to the residues of chaos as yet untouched by formatting. I follow the recommendation of Norbert Elias—another Simmelian—that, for example, anomie is not the opposite of social structure but a part of it (Elias 1994: 177). In this study, I take a historicist, social constructionist approach to identity and community and explore how new realities are constructed and old ones socially destructed. In many ways my sociology overlaps with both philosophy and anthropology. It easily blends in with the “sciences” of human experience. My cultural sociology draws on Simmel in sociology and Heidegger in philosophy. It can also be seen as a preliminary attempt at a Heideggerian sociology.

Perhaps I should clarify my own methodological position with respect to the various strands of phenomenology. The two strawmen that I would identify so as later to claim the middle ground are Bourdieu and symbolic interactionism. While I find the symbolic interactionist tradition’s lack of interest in power relations a great shortcoming (rendering it less than sociological), I am very frustrated with Bourdieu’s ultimate translation and reduction of everything to power relations, regardless how “fine” the varieties of power he might identify. I believe that cultural sociology, when conducted phenomenologically, pays particular attention to questions of historicity, the fragility of the subjective and intersubjective worlds and their temporal/spatial processes. In that



way, phenomenology reflects true human experience, which is always grounded in time and place. This tradition has its origins in the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger and its sociological articulation in the work of Schutz, Berger and Luckmann. A less restrictive list would include philosophers like Nietzsche and Foucault and sociologists like Simmel and Weber.

A neglected promise of phenomenology is that it can restore the primacy of experience vis-à-vis the ideal types. The Weberian ideal types are abstracted, formalized reports of experiences “elsewhere” and “in the past.” At best they are averages, a form of reluctant generalization. There is no way to avoid them, since the very ethnographic account one produces based on experience turns into an inventory of ideal types for another interpreter/reader. However, what needs to be done is to overcome the alienation from experience that we see in such methods as surveys, where the researcher speaks and observes “from nowhere.” As Stephan Fuchs observes, “location decides what an observer can and cannot see. You can observe only that which can be observed from there. No observer can disclose ‘the’ world as such” (Fuchs 2001: 4). Not only the subjects and objects of our research but also we ourselves are in-the-world. Phenomenology rejects the view from nowhere. Being-in-the-world or intentionality expresses the fact that we are in “an irreducible ontological relationship with the world” (Moran 2000: 3).

The urge for generalization and abstraction almost completely severs the connection between ideal types and their origins in the lifeworld (experience, *pragmata*). The contrast between ideal types and experience is similar to the relationship between rationality and charisma. We often forget that rationality is nothing but a routinized

charisma. What makes a rationality rationality is not that it is not arbitrary, which it is, but that it is agreed upon and thus routinized. Instead of opposing charisma and rationality to each other, we need to place them in relation to each other on a continuum of nascence and congealment. Bourdieu's anti-theoretical theory of practice is an attempt to restore charismatic edge to particular experience (action) against the once-and-for-all abstract universalism of structuralism (Bourdieu 1990). Therefore, from the phenomenological and ethnographic points of view, the primacy belongs to experience, the very source of the objects of observation and abstraction.

It is remarkable that despite classical theory's anxiety about standardization and bureaucratization, modern-day sociology has succumbed to the desire for abstract generalizations and methodological bureaucracy. This crust of rational abstractness is burst through by ethnographic experience in life. The confrontation between these two traditions has a long history in the opposition between life and reason, and between Pascal and Descartes. Ethnography is exciting because it brings in fresh experience.

### **Methods, Data and Research Sites**

Kurt H. Wolff, a translator of Simmel and student of Karl Mannheim, suggests the term "surrender-and-catch" to describe a research style that we otherwise know as participant observation. The ethnographer must surrender himself to experience without prejudice or objectification, then withdraw to make sense of what he has seen. This, of course, is a methodological formulation of the Simmelian idea of the relationship between experience and culture, between life and forms. In pursuing this study, I unwittingly followed Wolff's advice, long before I came across it in my readings on

phenomenology. This dissertation is my catch, observations that I hope will be interesting both to fellow academic observers and to my fellow Muslim participants.

I am myself an immigrant to this country. I believe that my identity, my experiences as a minority (a Kurd) in Turkey and now as a Muslim and a foreigner here in the U.S. have given me greater access to the community and its complicated dynamics. In this dissertation I rely on ethnographic data that I gathered through casual conversations, taped informal interviews, and documentary-archival materials such as community magazines, weekly newspaper, flyers, and audio-visual media. I also observed and listened to what is not spoken, what is taken for granted. Indeed, the first half of this dissertation is precisely about matters that are increasingly being taken for granted, things that will soon sink forever beneath the waves of common sense.

My preliminary fieldwork began in the summer of 2003, when I spent two months as an intern at the national office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in Washington, DC. Working as an intern, I had the opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the functioning of one of the main Muslim organizations in the U.S. After this initial exposure, I continued to keep an eye on the field. I conducted most of my active fieldwork in the metro Detroit area between 2005 and 2007. Part of my data and insight comes from the *Building Islam in Detroit Project*, where I am a member of a research team exploring various aspects of the collective spaces Muslims have built in Detroit. As noted earlier, Detroit is home to more than 50 mosques and provides an ideal setting for observing the naturalization of Islam and the institutionalization of Muslim identity. The density and diversity of Muslims in the Detroit area allowed me to think comparatively across time and space.

In addition to my research in Detroit and Washington, DC, I have attended community events at both the regional and national levels, from fundraising dinners and community lectures to gatherings sponsored by national organizations. In particular, I attended several annual conventions of the *Islamic Society of North America* (ISNA), an organization that has been historically very influential in the shaping of American Islam. I also attended locally-organized conventions, campus study circles and other activities. The multiple sites of my ethnographic fieldwork enabled me to link the national and local levels of community experience.

### **Outline of Dissertation**

My dissertation is divided into two parts: “Cultural Settlement” and “Citizenship Practices.” Each part examines a different dimension of Muslim membership in American society. The first part deals with the orientations, translations and cultural fine tuning that take place at the interface of Muslim life and American forms. It examines how Muslims overcome the symbolic violence they initially felt living in a non-Muslim environment. The second part examines Muslim responses to the exclusion generated by 9/11. While the first part addresses the inward processes involved in cultural settlement, the second part is about the outward practices of Muslims who seek to shift boundaries that exclude them from full membership in American society (Figure 1.2).

<i>Finding Mecca in America: American Muslims and Cultural Citizenship</i>	
<b>Part I: Cultural Settlement</b>	<b>Part II: Citizenship Practices</b>
Boundary crossing	Boundary shifting
Internalization of American habitat	Externalization of Muslim identity
Making America Islamic	Making Islam American
Inward processes	Outward processes
Acts of immigration	Acts of citizenship
Pre-9/11 encounters	Post-9/11 practices

Figure 1.2. Conceptual orientation of the two parts of the dissertation.

For early Muslim immigrants, America was an unformatted territory and generated anxieties about preservation of their Islamic identity. They had to engage in a series of codifications: determining the direction towards Mecca, thinking about the ways of making English a Muslim language and deciding whether America could qualify as religiously legitimate homeland. America as a space, culture and domicile needed to be naturalized.

Chapter 2 explores how Muslims arriving on the American continent faced the question of establishing the direction towards Mecca (*qibla*). As America was outside the Muslim sacred canopy, it became a frontier that needed to be incorporated in the Muslim spatial imagination. Determination of the direction towards Mecca is an important way in which Islamic nomos was introduced into an otherwise profane space. Such codification efforts required the canonization of one “correct direction” at the expense of multiple directions. It emerged gradually over the course of Muslim settlement in America. Unification of qibla among American Muslims is a symbolic unification of the disparate Muslim communities as well. The practical and theoretical debates around the question of qibla in North America provide a metaphorical starting point for my discussion of Muslim membership in American society.

Chapter 3 examines another transition or translation that Muslims in the United States had to make. Muslims historically met with English primarily in two contexts: as the language of Christian missionaries and of European colonizers. Skepticism towards the English language persisted among religious Muslims for some time. With economic globalization and the emergence of English-speaking Muslim minorities, Muslim attitudes underwent a change. In this chapter I trace the genealogy of the encounter between English and Islam and discuss Muslim efforts to make English a Muslim language.

Chapter 4 deals with the difficulty some Muslims had in seeing America as a homeland. Historically, Muslim exposure to non-Muslim environments was discouraged. Muslim stay outside the land of Islam (Dar al Islam) was either temporary or out of necessity. With the rise of permanent Muslim minorities in the West, Muslims had to juridically justify their presence in a non-Muslim environment. This chapter contextualizes the origins of Muslim values and discourses about America— which stand in stark contrast to the anti-Americanism rampant in most of the Muslim world. I trace here how America gradually evolved in the minds of its Muslim inhabitants from a land of chaos to a land of Islam.

The formative experiences expressed by these three phenomena (direction, language and home) are increasingly taken for granted by second generation Muslims. As such they are the vanishing sites of negotiations that formed the backbone of American Muslim identity. During my fieldwork, I witnessed transitions whose traces are being lost over time. These three chapters provide a perspective on the constitution of Muslim common sense (doxa) in the United States.

The remaining chapters of the dissertation focus on the citizenship practices of American Muslims in relation to the larger American public. Unlike earlier chapters, these sections deal with Muslim practices after 9/11. American Muslims facing the risk of losing their civil liberties and human rights have been engaged in various practices of undoing exclusion. They assert three interrelated messages: “We are citizens” (civil rights), “we are kin” (Abrahamic discourse), and “we are human” (comedy). These are the themes of the final three chapters, dealing with avenues for cultivating and protecting Muslim cultural citizenship in a time of collective neurosis (Figure 1.3).

<b>Orientations</b>	<b>Interventions</b>
DIRECTION ( <i>Space</i> ) Codification of <i>qibla</i>	ADVOCACY ( <i>Victimhood</i> ) National level, pan-Muslim
LANGUAGE ( <i>Culture</i> ) Making English a Muslim language	ABRAHAMIC ( <i>Kinship</i> ) Local level, congregational
HOME ( <i>Belonging</i> ) Making America homeland	COMEDY ( <i>Humanity</i> ) Individual level, small group

Figure 1.3. A thematic list of individual chapters.

In Chapter 5, I explore how Muslims as novice Americans suddenly found themselves on the frontlines of the struggle for civil rights. As noted earlier, the impact of 9/11 on Muslims created both exclusion and visibility. It has also forced Muslims to seek recourse in the legal institutions of citizenship, which has led to increased sensitization to Muslim identity on the part of American law. The story of the largest Muslim civil rights group, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, provides an illustration of the dual outcomes of crises like 9/11. Through a discourse of victimhood, Muslims (and only

those Muslims who are protected by the law) have been able to fight discrimination.

While 9/11 produced discrimination and stigma for Muslims, it has also forced American law and Muslim citizens to speak to one another.

Chapter 6 argues that Muslims have intuitively recognized the fact that the appeal to civil rights alone is not sufficient to secure Muslim cultural citizenship. They must also reach out to other faith groups through involvement in interfaith work. Exploring the landscape of interfaith work in the local metro Detroit area, I ask why Muslims prefer “Abrahamic discourse” over liberal pluralism in their search for inclusion. I argue that the collective neurosis and resurgent nativism on the part of the American nation makes Muslims gravitate toward a genealogical language of faith. Interfaith activism by Muslims has significant implications for their citizenship and constitutes an implicit demand for boundary shifting in a society that still defines itself in many ways as Judeo-Christian.

Chapter 7 ventures onto “funny” ground: the emergence of Muslim comedy after the tragedy of 9/11. By examining the rise of comedy troupes such as Allah Made Me Funny and Axis of Evil, I link Muslim comedy to Islamophobia and the emergence of the “negative charisma” of Muslims in the post-9/11 era. I interpret Muslim ethnic comedy as a plea to humanity by standup comedians, a way of undoing otherness on a more personal level. A second-generation phenomenon, Muslim comedy is also a symptom of Muslims’ Americanization. I conclude my discussion by offering a new theoretical framework for understanding ethnic comedy in general.

Chapter 8 is a reflection on Muslim experience with a view towards the future. It also points to the contributions and implications of this study.



## PART I: CULTURAL SETTLEMENT

### CHAPTER 2

#### **Finding Mecca in America: Muslim Directionality and the Codification of American Space**

Muszaphar Shukor has a problem. As Malaysia's first astronaut, he's scheduled to lift off October 10 in a Russian Soyuz spacecraft for a nine-day visit during the holy month of Ramadan to the International Space Station. He's a devout Muslim and when he says his daily prayers he wants to face Mecca, specifically the Ka'aba, the holiest place in Islam. That's where the trouble comes in. From ISS, orbiting 220 miles above the surface of the Earth, the qibla (an Arabic word meaning the direction a Muslim should pray toward Mecca) changes from second to second. What's a devout Muslim to do? Malaysia's space agency, Angkasa, convened a conference last year to wrestle with these and other questions.

--Patrick DiJusto, "A Muslim Astronaut's Dilemma: How to Face Mecca from Space," *WIRED*, 09/26/2007

#### **Introduction**

If a tower were to be built in Mecca such that it could be seen from North America, in which direction would that tower appear? The question seems a simple one. Yet the answer has far-ranging consequences for Muslims in the United States. Far from hypothetical, it has a direct impact on the everyday lives of practicing Muslims. The most immediate consequence is that such a direction will determine where Muslims turn during their five daily prayers. It will also have an effect on the architecture of their mosques and the way they bury their dead. In other words, to carry out their everyday lives as Muslims, they must identify the direction towards Mecca.

The immigration of Muslims to the United States triggers this question, one no longer asked in their countries of origin. At the same time, Americans who convert to Islam—thereby crossing another kind of boundary—are faced with the same issue, one that surely never occurred to them in their non-Muslim past. An obvious implication of this question is that Muslims engage in a process of re-orientation wherever they move. This spatial orientation is necessary to center their location on Mecca. Muslim directionality—taken for granted and routinized in historically Muslim countries—becomes a problem when Muslims move to an unfamiliar place.

Historical accounts show that Muslim slaves who were brought to America turned in prayer towards the east. Immigrant Muslims, the bulk of whom arrived after the change in immigration policies in 1965, turned for many years to the southeast. African Americans who converted to Islam under the Nation of Islam and were known as Black Muslims turned, at least for a time, towards the west.

When I ask this question of young Muslims in Metro Detroit, the answer I get most often is “none of the above.” They respond very quickly and easily: “Of course, the tower will appear in the northeast.” Today, for the overwhelming majority of Muslims, it is common sense and established fact that the direction of Mecca in America is northeast.

Muslims’ encounter with American space required them to mentally digest their new environment, which meant inscribing Islamic *nomos* on American geography. The Muslim direction towards Mecca had to be extended in such a way that America, a previously external geography, could be included in the Muslim spatial imagination. Multiple directions emerged in the anomic space of North America because it was literally a New World for Muslims; it came to them as *terra incognita*. The shift from old

directions to new has left architectural scars, much like an accent in language, in some Detroit area mosques. In this chapter, I explore a unique aspect of the Muslim encounter with America and ask how Muslims appropriate and codify American space.

### **America as Ocean and Storm**

In the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast and pay greater attention to their spiritual lives; they read Qur'an more frequently than at other times of the year. On October 7, 2005, a Friday during Ramadan, I was at the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, for *jumah*, congregational prayer. The mosque is always well attended on Fridays; today, because of Ramadan, it was more full than usual. The Unity Center is a relatively affluent community whose membership is multiethnic and professional. Many of them are physicians, engineers or business people. Imam Musa, the spiritual leader of the mosque, is an immigrant from Egypt. He served previously at another mosque in Dearborn, where he had a predominantly monoethnic, working class congregation. He speaks English with an accent. The sermons and speeches I have heard of his are always very ecumenical, moderate and spiritual. I have also heard from others that he used to have a more conservative outlook and that he changed significantly as he moved from one community to another. At the end of his sermon, which was about the Prophet's practices during the month of Ramadan, he encouraged the congregation to make donations to the mosque. He reminded them of the Prophet's generosity during Ramadan, then turned to the story of Noah to emphasize the need to support community infrastructure in an environment where Muslims live as a minority. Mosques, Imam Musa

told his audience, were like Noah's ark, buffeted by the challenges of ocean and storm. "We should donate," he said, "for the safety of our children; so that we *don't get lost*."

Imam Musa's remarks about the danger of assimilation into a Christian society were not unusual. Most Muslim community leaders and clerics seek to promote two often contradictory imperatives. They want new generations to interact with the majority culture and be fluent in it, but they also want them to maintain their Muslim identity. In the absence of necessary community institutions and crystallized normative guidelines, there is a perception that Muslims are very chaotic in their practices. Converts surf the internet for the most congenial style of their newfound religion and "shop around" for suitable mosques in their areas. The second generation often finds their immigrant parents and community leaders inept at dealing with the American context and with other faiths. Imams themselves usually oscillate in their sermons between catering to the mores of the older generation and soothing the exasperation of the young.

Imams face constant challenges over their roles in the American mosque, which can be dramatically different from mosques overseas. Here they are expected to assume the role of counselor as well as prayer leader. Even mosques that started their lives as simple prayer spaces have gradually become community centers with basketball courts, schools, libraries and soup kitchens— and as such they create new roles and expectations for their imams. Practices vary significantly, however, depending on their particular constituencies' class and ethnic backgrounds.

Community leaders like Imam Musa present mosques as ships that will allow Muslims to navigate the anomic environment of American society. Enduring storms in the ocean of America, they imply, is possible only if Muslims take refuge in the mosques.

Avoiding assimilation and constructing an American Muslim identity requires symbolic unity among Muslims. That unity finds its metaphorical expression in what Muslims believe unites them all around the world: *qibla*, the direction toward Mecca. At mosques like the Unity Center, Muslims collectively turn toward Mecca.

The idea of coming together as a congregation and facing one common direction has a powerful place in the imagination of Muslims as a global community. It is not only a matter of symbolic unity but also a practical requirement of their religion, which is probably why Muslims were pioneers in the invention of such direction-finding instruments as astrolabes. If we are to pursue the larger implications of Imam Musa's metaphor of Noah's ark, Muslim life in American society is a matter of survival in a spiritually threatening environment. Muslims can survive as a community only to the extent that they see their mosques as ships and find their way (*qibla*) through the storm and chaos created by displacement. America does not so much pose a threat to Muslims as it induces a sense of agoraphobia: it represents a disorienting open space. This perception is most visible in the experience of early mosques, which as the first ships floating in the ocean of America had to change their direction and sail uncharted waters.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mosques seeking their Qiblas: Ships and Astrolabes**

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<sup>5</sup> The perception of America as an open space is not unique to Muslims. The discovery of America also resulted in a change in the orientation of Europeans.

In the Middle Ages, Christian princes and peoples of Europe considered Rome or Jerusalem to be the center of the earth, and regarded themselves as part of the old world[...] In 1492, when a 'new world' actually emerged, the structure of all traditional concepts of the *center* and *age* of the earth had to change. European princes and nations now saw a vast, formerly unknown, non-European space arise beside them. Most essential and decisive for the following centuries, however, was the fact that the emerging new world did not appear as a new enemy, but as *free space*... (Schmitt 1950: 87).

The Metro Detroit area is a unique place for the study of Muslim experience in America. It has one of the largest concentrations of Arabs and Muslims in the United States. It is a historical destination of Muslim immigration and the birthplace of African American Islam. It has been home to the earliest mosques in America. In no other place is Islam as naturalized and institutionalized as in the cities of Detroit and Dearborn, where there are more than 50 mosques. If anywhere, the Detroit area must be the best place to look for the itinerary of Muslim life in its passage to America.

My visits to the dozens of mosques in the Detroit area taught me the most basic fact about the Muslim community—its bewildering diversity. From Bangladeshis to Bosnians, Lebanese to Yemenis, from Iraqis to Albanians, Senegalese to African Americans, a whole range of ethnicities, languages and sects are represented. A middle way between treating them all as one and getting lost in the wilderness of their diversity is to classify them based on size and cultural proximity. The three major Muslim groups that constitute the bulk of Muslims in the Detroit area and represent the majority of the overall American Muslim population are South Asians, Arabs and African-Americans. They all have mosques and community centers in the Detroit area. Some are inner-city mosques; others are located in rich suburbs. The overwhelming majority of these institutions are very new. Most of them opened within the last two decades. Many of the mosques are converted buildings that used to be churches, houses, workshops, night clubs, banks and even bowling alleys. To mention just a few, the *American Muslim Center* used to be a church, the *Muslim Center of Detroit* was a bank and the *Islamic Institute of Knowledge* was once a bowling alley.

The first mosque in the United States was established in Highland Park, now a city within the boundaries of Detroit. The *Building Islam in Detroit Project* research team unearthed documentary evidence that this first mosque was opened in 1921. There are mosques with competing claims to being the oldest in the country (Khalidi 2000: 317). The first imam of the Highland Park mosque was Imam Hussein Karoub. When I talked to his grandson, Carl Karoub, the first thing he said was: “At the time of my grandfather Islam was not bad, it was unknown.” Imam Karoub was originally from Syria. He came to Michigan in 1914 to work for the Ford plant.

Built on Victor Street in Highland Park, this first mosque was initially known as the “Muhammadan Hall,” as it was called on a fundraising flier from the 1920’s that Carl Karoub showed me. Unfortunately his grandfather’s mosque did not survive long. After his Highland Park experiment, Imam Hussein Karoub led another mosque. This new mosque was built in 1937 at the end of the Great Depression near Ford’s new Rouge Plant in Dearborn’s Southend. Imam Hussein Karoub himself, however, continued to serve the community as imam until he died in 1973.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Imam Karoub is buried in Roseland park Cemetery. When I later visited the cemetery, I read on his gravestone: “Rev. Imam Hussein Karoub –Leader of Islam in North America- born 1893 died 1973.”

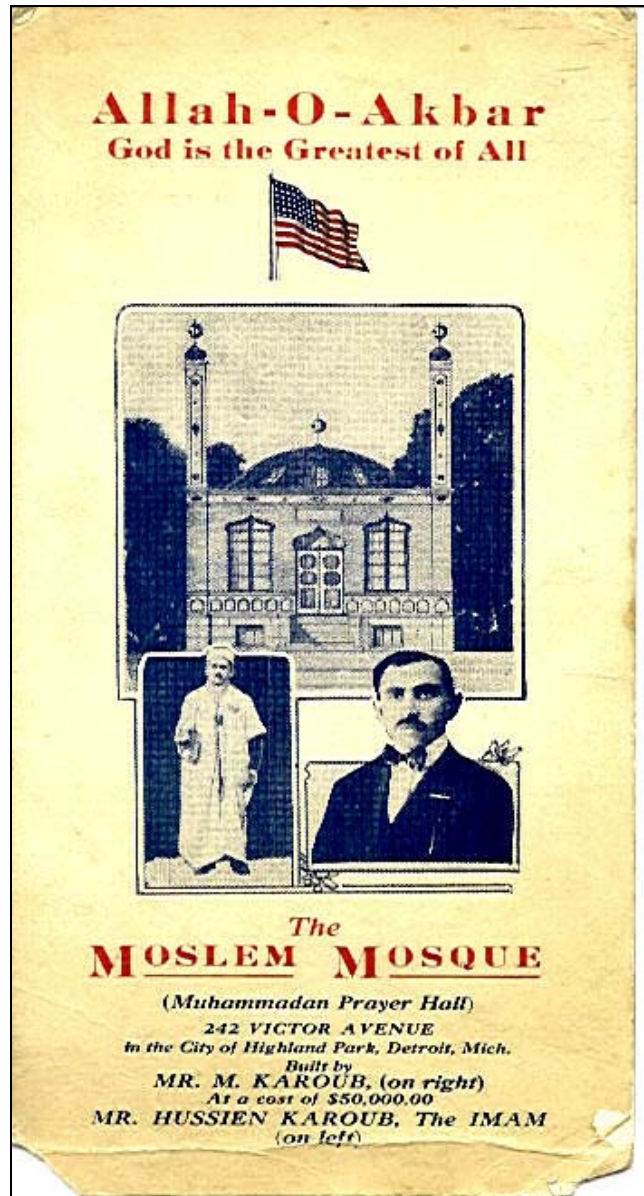


Figure 2.1. Fundraising flyer for the first mosque in Detroit, ca.1921. (Courtesy of Carl Karoub)

Imam Karoub's second mosque still exists on Dix Road and is officially called the *American Moslem Society*, but people simply call it the Dix Mosque. Built by Lebanese immigrants, Dix mosque is now a predominantly Yemeni mosque in a poor industrial neighborhood. It is the oldest surviving mosque in the Metro Detroit area. It has undergone several renovations and expansions and its ethnic/racial composition has also



shifted significantly. Among the mosque's historical oddities is the fact that early immigrant communities used to congregate there on Sundays rather than Fridays, the Muslim sabbath. Used as a social hall, the space was often appropriated for weddings and dancing, something that would never happen in a mosque in the Middle East. When believers prayed, they prayed towards the East or Southeast. Then

one Friday in 1976 a group of Muslims gathered on the doorstep of the Dix Mosque in the Southend of Dearborn. Finding the door locked, they forced their way in and proceeded to do what Muslims all over the world do every Friday at midday: perform *Jumaa* communal prayers. For this group [mostly Yemeni and Palestinian] their dramatic entrance into the mosque symbolized its reclamation by "authentic" Muslims. (Abraham 2000: 279).

The story of Dix Mosque is interesting in many ways. One interpretation of this particular episode in its history is that the newcomer immigrant Muslims were troubled by what they saw to be the alienation of their fellow Muslims. They saw the earlier immigrants as simply "lost" in the ocean of America. They had lost their spatial and temporal bearings. In the eyes of newly-arrived and conservative immigrants, the assimilated Lebanese immigrants had come unmoored from Muslim time and calendar. "That the Dix Mosque was not open on Fridays was abnormal, even scandalous, in the eyes of the immigrant Muslim community." As Nabeel Abraham describes, the newcomers— who eventually came to outnumber the old immigrants— declared that "henceforth, there will be no singing or dancing in this house of worship" (Abraham 2000: 280). The Islam that reached the shores of America came in waves; its history is therefore one of constant adjustments and re-orientations. The case of the Dix Mosque is just one among many where new immigrants brought in more traditional religious expertise and introduced changes which led to more orthodox practices.

Long before the arrival of Yemenis and Palestinians, new mosques were being opened in various parts of Detroit. If Imam Hussein Karoub was the first Sunni<sup>7</sup> imam in the area, Imam Muhammad Jawad Chirri was his Shia counterpart. Imam Chirri led the Shia community and established one of the most effective and affluent religious organizations in the area. The Shia community once led by Imam Chirri now owns a major mosque complex that is increasingly becoming an icon of American Islam: the *Islamic Center of America*. It is located on Ford Road, very near the birthplace of Henry Ford.

Today, of several dozen mosques in Detroit, only a few are almost half a century old and still in use. Around the time the Lebanese Shia community was building the first *Islamic Center of America* in Dearborn, Albanian Muslims had already opened their *Albanian Islamic Center* in Harper Woods. Established in 1963 and 1962 respectively, these two mosques are of the same generation and can be distinguished from other mosques in several ways. First of all, they were built as mosques and not converted from another use—still the most common way of starting mosques. They had larger immigrant bases, which helped the communities reach critical mass. Secondly and more importantly, these two mosques each have two *mihirabs* (See Figure 1). The *mihirab* is a niche in the wall in the direction of Mecca, both giving the prayer area its orientation and designating the place where the imam stands to lead the prayer.

In both of the mosques, the imams no longer use the original *mihirabs* that were built into the walls then thought to be facing Mecca. Instead they face a different

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<sup>7</sup> Sunni and Shia are the two sects in Islam. The difference goes back to the question of the succession of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis, who constitute the majority sect, believe that there was not a designated caliph and that the successors of the prophet are his companions. Shia, on the other hand, believe that the fourth caliph Ali was the designated caliph and that the family of the prophet (Ahl ul Bait) has priority over his companions.

direction, which is not inscribed in the wall as a niche but is highlighted by the placement of a prayer rug and the organization of carpets. Accordingly, the whole congregation also forms lines behind the imams facing a direction different from the original orientation of the mosque. In terms of use of space, there is a cartographic incongruence between the congregation's layout and the shape of the hall where they pray.

I wondered about the background story of the two *mihirabs*. When I asked Imam Shuajb Gerguri of the *Albanian Islamic Center* about the reasons, he gave me a clear answer: "Back then they did not know, they used the flat map." He told me the direction was changed in the early 1980s when it became clear that the direction was northeast and not southeast. At the time of construction of these mosques, the direction to Mecca and thus the placement of the *mihrab* was determined on the basis of a Mercator map as opposed to a spherical projection. And when the *qibla* was changed, it left a permanent scar on the architecture of these two mosques.



Figure 2.2. The old and the new directions toward Mecca at the Albanian Islamic Center in Harper Woods, Michigan. The old direction is indicated by the tiled *mihrab*; the new one, by prayer rugs.

Though most visible in these mosques, the consequences of *qibla* change were not limited to them. Muslim graves also had to be re-oriented. The arrangement reached with Roseland Park Cemetery, where Imam Hussein Karoub and many other Muslims are buried, was that because of the “improper positioning of the plots,” Muslim remains were to be reinterred “in another section of the cemetery in accordance with Islamic requirement” (Abraham 2000: 300).

From the re-positioning of cemetery plots to the abandoned *mihrabs* in old generation mosques, the changing answers to the question of where the imaginary tower in Mecca would be seen in America has had important consequences. In order to prepare

the ground for a detailed discussion of what is known as “the *qibla* debate in America,” we need first to explore the symbolic meaning of the two ends of *qibla*: Mecca and America.

I begin the next section by discussing the significance of Mecca, as both the focus of pilgrimage and the source of *qibla*. I will go about this in a counterintuitive way: explaining an empirical yet unfamiliar social object by means of a theoretical and philosophical discussion. I am well aware of the relative unfamiliarity of the two parties I am putting in dialogue here. Nevertheless, I find that the best way to give a degree of conceptual legibility to the phenomenon of Muslim directionality is by resorting to theoretical tools familiar to my audience in the social sciences.

### **Muslim Directionality: Linking Mecca and America**

Muslims have a rule. Wherever they are they should turn toward Mecca for their religious rituals. Therefore, they live with a spatial orientation comparable to the concept of intentionality in phenomenology. To understand the dynamics of this directionality as part of Muslim religious life, we need to explain the importance and centrality of Mecca for Muslims.

Mecca is the holiest city in Islam. The birthplace of Prophet Muhammad, Mecca is also home to the most sacred structure for Muslims: the Kaaba. It is believed that the Kaaba was first built by Abraham. Kaaba literally means ‘cube,’ in reference to the building’s shape. *Hajj*, one of the five pillars of Islam, requires Muslims who have the material resources and health to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The five pillars are (1) testimony of faith, (2) five daily prayers, (3) fasting during the month of Ramadan, (4) almsgiving, and (5) pilgrimage to Mecca.

Every year, Mecca hosts millions of Muslims from all over the world; the pilgrimage is the largest continuously held transnational convocation of people. As part of the ritual, pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba. In this rite of passage, pilgrims strip themselves of all status symbols and dress identically. They shed their ethnic and gender differences and form *communitas* as they enter Mecca's liminal space of exception and the spatial aura of the Kaaba (Turner 1973). They also follow a specific code of conduct. After completing hajj the pilgrims assume a new status and gain the title of *hajji* or *al hajji*.<sup>9</sup>

Although hajj is a major religious requirement in Islam, it is only one aspect of the Muslim relationship to Mecca. Muslims also engage with Mecca on a daily basis. Another pillar of Islam requires them to pray five times a day, and in those five daily prayers, Muslims face Mecca, more specifically the Kaaba. The Kaaba is the source of *qibla*. It should be noted, however, that the first *qibla* in the formative years of Islam was not Kaaba but Jerusalem (Bashear 1991: 267). Early Islam shared the direction with Judaism, and the first Muslims also prayed in Christian churches in locations where they did not have a prayer space of their own. It was only later that Prophet Muhammad changed *qibla* permanently to the Kaaba. Although some scholars of early Islam argue that "one cannot speak of 'one original *qibla* of Islam,' but rather of several currents in the search for one" (Bashear 1991: 282), what is important in this symbolic unfolding of Islam is that the change of *qibla* allowed Islam to gradually distinguish itself from both Christianity and Judaism. As Zerubavel shows in his discussion of Easter and Passover, a

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<sup>9</sup> Mecca and the experience of hajj loom large in many convert narratives. One of the most famous Western converts is Muhammad Asad (formerly Leopold Weiss) who wrote about his conversion and experience in Mecca in *The Road to Mecca* (1954). For a more recent book on the conversion and hajj experiences of Westerners including Muhammad Asad and Malcolm X, written by an American convert, see Michael Wolfe's *One Thousand Roads to Mecca* (1997).

unique symbolic system, be it temporal (calendar) or spatial (*qibla*), “accentuates the similitude among group members while, at the same time, establish[ing] intergroup boundaries”(Zerubavel 1982: 284).<sup>10</sup>

The revelation on the basis of which Prophet Muhammad changed the *qibla* came to him while he was praying in a mosque in Medina. This mosque— now among the city’s pilgrimage sites— is called *Masjid al Qiblatain*, “the mosque with two *qiblas*.” The fact that *qibla* changed in the early history of Islam is inscribed in the structure of this mosque. All of the other mosques in Muslim-inhabited geographies have one single *qibla*. That is, they have one *mihrab*. They are all oriented towards the Kaaba in Mecca. The mosque with two directions is thus a unique mosque: it is the site where the decision for the *qibla* rule was made. It is the site of the decision that precedes the norm. Its similarity with the two mosques in Detroit therefore says a great deal about the nature of rules and rationality. At the bottom of a rule one finds an arbitrary decision. When decision is repeated so that it becomes congealed into a norm, we lose sight of the original decision. The parallelism between the spatial origin of Islam and its frontiers in North America is an interesting issue to which I will return towards the end of this chapter.

The Kaaba is the center of global Muslim spatial structure. Also called “the house of God,” the Kaaba is the embodiment of divine sovereignty, towards which all sacred practices and rituals are oriented. In congregational prayers worshippers form lines which, if connected, would constitute concentric circles around the Kaaba and across the

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<sup>10</sup> There are many ways in which groups such as the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam stress their distinctiveness with respect to one another. A list of the boundary work in which those monotheistic religions engage would include such practices as dietary laws (kosher and halal) or dress codes, including head covering for women and men.

earth. When Muslims slaughter animals they turn toward Kaaba and they bury their dead in such a way that the graves are oriented toward Kaaba. The work of the Kaaba is similar to that of Heidegger's Greek temple:

It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being (Heidegger 1971: 41).

In other words, the Kaaba makes the *worlding* of the world possible by standing there; it "first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air" (Heidegger 1971: 41). As a temple, the Kaaba translates nature into culture, bare geography into directionality. It punctuates space, producing order out of chaos. It creates nearness and distance; it "holds" the world as an oriented space.

The focal point of Muslim imagination, the Kaaba is also a symbol, one that Hegel would call the ultimate symbol of Islamic monotheism. In *The Philosophy of History*, he writes:

The object of Mahometan worship is purely intellectual; no image, no representation of Allah is tolerated. Mahomet is a prophet but still man –not elevated above human weaknesses. The leading features of Mahometanism involve this –that in actual existence nothing can become fixed, but that everything is destined to expand itself in activity and life in the boundless amplitude of the world, so that the worship of the One remains the only bond by which the whole is capable of uniting. In this expansion, this active energy, all limits, all national and caste distinctions vanish; no particular race, political claim of birth or possession is regarded– only *man* as a *believer*." (Hegel 1956: 357)

The idea of Islam as a monotheistic religion that strictly polices the transcendence and unity of God and works as a racial equalizer finds its best symbolic expression in the act of *hajj* (pilgrimage). As noted earlier, the impact of *hajj* as an experience is



particularly visible in convert narratives. Most famously, in his autobiography Malcolm X writes, “I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered ‘white’– but the ‘white’ attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color”(Malcolm X 1964: 391). In an article on pilgrimage and ritual process, “The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” Victor Turner quotes this paragraph to illustrate the concept of *communitas* (Turner 1973: 193) which he further develops in *The Ritual Process* (1969).

From anywhere in the world one must turn towards the Kaaba and from any place there is only *one* correct direction to the Kaaba; yet from within the Kaaba *all* directions are correct. Someone who prays inside the Kaaba can turn toward any direction. This is an extremely important matter because it designates the Kaaba as an exception to the rule of directionality. The Kaaba as an exception is sacred. In spaces of exception the rule is suspended or, to put it differently, there is no rule. The Kaaba therefore is characterized by an *originary indistinction* (Agamben 2005: 6). The Kaaba as a center gives rise to the world around it and while structuring that world, itself escapes structurality (Derrida 1980: 278).

Before being structured, the center and the structure are identical. Once difference is introduced, they become constitutive “others”, with the center occupying the privileged place. The concept of “center” as it is used here draws not only on its usage by Jacques Derrida (1980) but also those of Edward Shils (1972) and Victor Turner (1973). That the Kaaba escapes structurality (i.e., directionality) indicates its status as exception (Agamben 2005, Schmitt 1988). That the Kaaba structures the world around itself points

to its charismatic character as a space (Weber 1968). Charisma<sup>11</sup> is that which rule (or rationality) cannot explain, where explanation means subjection to a comparison and regularity. Since later readings of the Weberian concept of charisma have unfortunately focused on religious and political authority and leadership, the understanding of charisma has been limited and its obverse remains to be brought to light. Here, I would like to make two interventions based on my treatment of the Kaaba as a charismatic space. First, as Bourdieu (1991: 250) and Agamben (2005: 85) have aptly noted, charisma should not be treated as a quality of a person but of a position. Second, I would argue that there are two types of charisma: *positive charisma* and *negative charisma*. I will further explain these two points below.

Weber's charismatic leader, for example, has *exceptional* qualities; people follow him or her without question. But this is only one way that charisma makes its appearance. What does it mean that charisma is a quality of location or position and not person? It means something counterintuitive: it is not that great leaders emerge in times of crisis, but that in times of crisis (states of exception) the leaders that emerge appear great (charismatic). This understanding of charisma goes beyond "charisma of the office." Once we dissociate charisma from the person and return it to its rightful owner, location, we can begin to look for other locations where charisma makes its appearance.

In my conceptualization, charisma is the structural equivalent of exception and anomie<sup>12</sup> in that it refers to locations where structure or *nomos* is absent (i.e., Turner's

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<sup>11</sup> Charisma in its pre-Weberian religious use means a "gift of grace" and it refers to an incursion of the divine into everyday life. A spring of singularity and miracles, charisma therefore recognizes no established rule (Rieff 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim used the concept of anomie primarily to refer to a condition of inadequate procedural rules or a failure of rule development to keep pace with social change. This means that at the margins (frontiers) of social change we come across anomic space where rules are absent. On closer inspection, Durkheim's two

“anti-structure”). Such locations cannot be subjected to the rule –as in the case of the Kaaba. Or they may not have yet been claimed, appropriated or subjected to the rule—as in the case of early Muslims’ perception of America. The rule can be a rationality, a legal code or a language of communication. In our case, the rule is directionality. Irregularities, violations of the rule are indeed charismatic, but in a different way. In the case of positive charisma, such irregularities are approached with fascination and special treatment (they are seen as above the law). Thus suspension of the rule of directionality inside the Kaaba marks it as divine. The empty space inside the Kaaba thus becomes the location of an omnipresent God. As the house of God, the Kaaba therefore has positive charisma. It is omnidirectional.

The same absence of rule is present in the case of negative charisma, too, but such irregularities are treated as pathologies and considered repulsive (below the law, substandard, incorrect). The contrast can be seen in the ways irregular language use is interpreted. While elites might seek distinction by deviating from the most widespread usage of language, immigrants seek to eliminate the differences which make them accented and incomplete (Bourdieu 1991: 46). Here again we see the two ends of charisma: positive charisma which one seeks to maintain and negative charisma which one seeks to eliminate. Again the translation of this to our case would be that Muslims strive to get close to the Kaaba (through pilgrimage) and while showing anxiety towards full immersion in America. The former represents the source of *nomos*, the latter the lack of *nomos* (anomie).

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concepts of anomie refer to inadequacy or absence of *nomos* whether they are procedural rules (in *Division of Labor*) or moral norms (in *Suicide*) (Olsen 1965: 37-44).

In short, if positive charisma is associated with creativity and leadership, negative charisma should be associated with chaos/anomie and lack of status. Negative charisma, I would argue, is also the location of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*. Both positive and negative charisma “emerge where social structure is not” (Turner 1969: 126). In that liminal or anomic space where symbolic violence has not yet produced structure, there is neither hierarchy nor distinction. In a sense, negative charisma is naked, bare life (Agamben 1998). It is the unformatted surface, a geography without a *qibla*. It needs to be arrested, tamed and formatted. Negative charisma is anomic and must be subjected to discipline. It is forced to acquire docility, legibility, submissiveness to the rule. With the following statement about *communitas*, Turner summarizes the ways in which charisma makes its appearance at various locations of the structure: “*Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath the structure, in inferiority.” (Turner 1969: 128)

Between the positive and negative locations of charisma lies the territory of the rule. Yet the rule has a direction. It starts from positive charisma (the center, Kaaba) and flows toward the rest of the space with the ultimate objective of subjecting that space to its rule (by routinization and rationalization). As it flows, the rule clears and cleans, since that which is *unclear* is often seen as *unclean*. (Douglas 1966, Zerubavel 1991, 37). Mecca and America are two spaces linked together by a rule. The rule originates in Mecca as directionality and reaches America as a new surface.

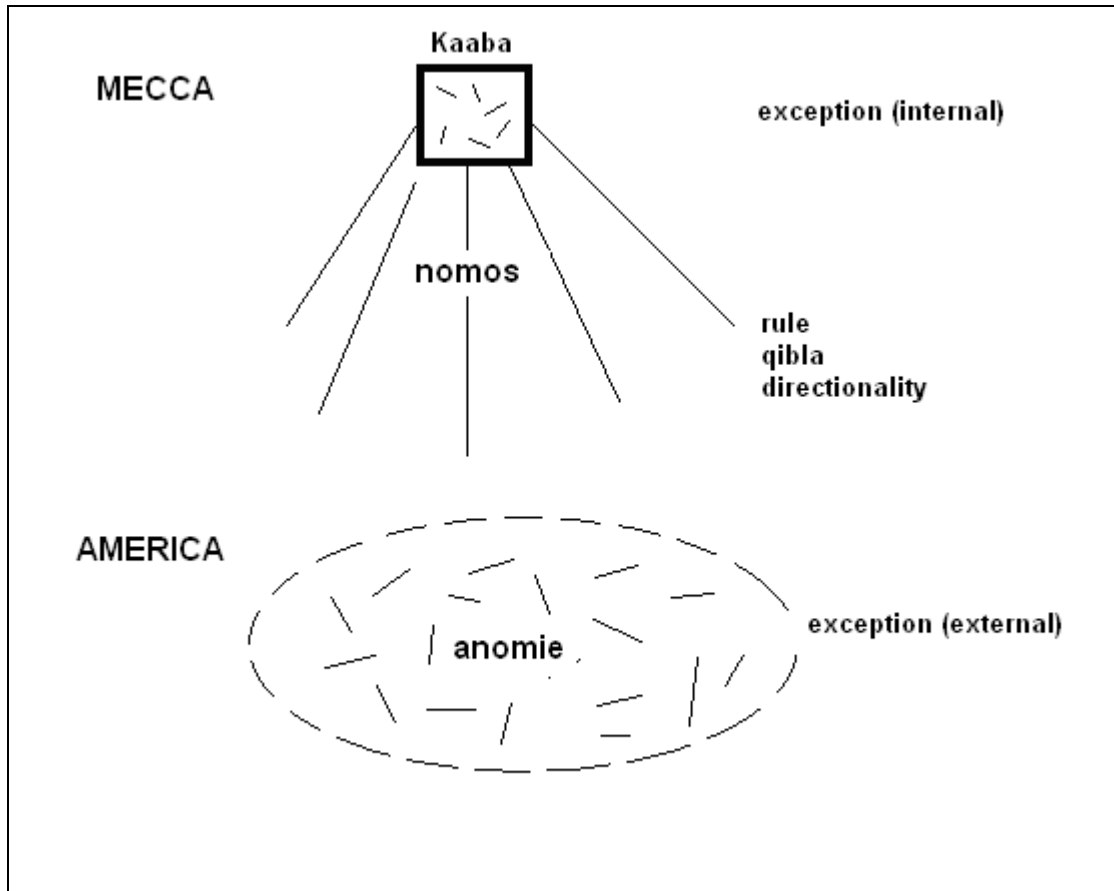


Figure 2.3. Center and Margin. The exceptional space of Kaaba gives structure to the not-yet-formatted space of America through the imposition of nomos (directionality).

The sense of universalism generated by the Kaaba is an effect of the monotheistic exclusion of anything and anyone from the locus of divinity. The Kaaba is the house of a transcendent God and no other entity can claim that location. All the social and geographic space around and outside the Kaaba is subjected to a set of rules. This subjection produces believers and their orientation. In ways both physical and conceptual, the Kaaba resembles the panopticon that Jeremy Bentham developed and Michel Foucault analyzed. The architectural structure of the panopticon was simple: “at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower” (Foucault 1977:200). The Kaaba is a cubical tower at the center; at its periphery is a square building with rounded corners.

The building around the Kaaba is called *Masjidul Haram* (the Sacred Mosque). If the panopticon has a periphery of partitioned space with isolated cells, the Kaaba's periphery includes both open and covered spaces for prayer. The spaces are punctuated by pillars, but they are not isolated. While the panopticon is a closed disciplinary machine, the Kaaba is an open device for spiritual discipline or for the disciplining of souls. Although Foucault considers panopticism the ultimate modality of disciplinary power in modern times and a technique of control which transcends the architecture of the panopticon, the Kaaba cannot be considered equally embedded in power or a product of modern times. Yet it exercises a similar function as a device that symbolically formats an open surface and produces space.

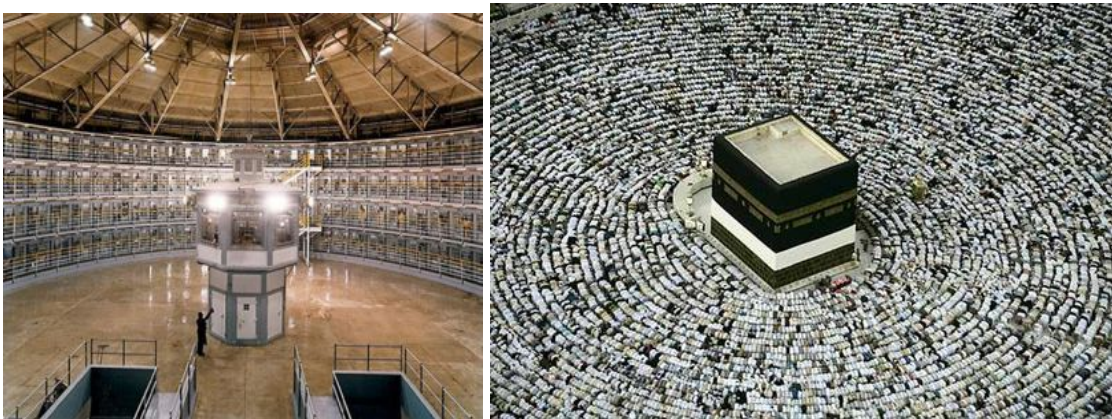


Figure 2.4. Structural homology of Bentham's Panopticon and the Kaaba, focal point of Islamic sacred space.

As a modality of partitioning space and giving orientation, the similarities between the panopticon and the Kaaba are striking. Both the tower and the Kaaba see everything but cannot be seen. In its ideal use, the panopticon needs no guardian in its tower, since it is supposed to wield an impersonal and unverifiable power over its subjects. Inmates in the cells cannot see the guardian in the tower, while the guardian in

the tower sees them all. Whether they are physically in Mecca or not, Muslims all turn towards an empty building.<sup>13</sup> An empty building with opaque walls, the Kaaba makes visible that which is invisible. It brings forth a world by allowing for the partitioning of space into directions. The Kaaba is a mental pole and the constitutive lack which allows the Muslim layer of direction (a metaphysical construct) to emerge as presence.

Annemarie Schimmel notes that for Muslims the Kaaba is “the navel of the earth” (1994: 57). The Kaaba is a “temple” that “in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.”(Heidegger 1971: 42)<sup>14</sup>

### **America as Margin: Extension of Qibla and Erasure of Negative Charisma**

Upon leaving the Arabian peninsula, wherever Muslims went they codified place and time according to their religious calendar and sense of direction. Determination of *qibla* therefore is an archaic issue for the people of the lands where Islam has a long history. The issue of direction to Mecca resurfaces in geographies where Muslim presence is more recent.

The Muslim encounter with America as a geography and culture (i.e., through immigration) is marked by the re-emergence of the question of the direction to Mecca. The same is true for the American, especially the African American, encounter with Islam (i.e., through conversion). Both immigrant and convert Muslims engaged in a

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<sup>13</sup> Before Islam, the Kaaba was a sacred temple controlled by the pagan tribes of Arabia and the building was full of the idols they worshipped. Those idols were later removed by the Prophet Muhammad after he took control of Mecca. The emptiness of the Kaaba is thus in itself a symbol of Islamic monotheism.

<sup>14</sup> According to Heidegger, contemplation “is derived from *templum*, i.e., from [the name of] the place which can be seen from any point, and from which any point can be seen. The ancients called this place a *templum*” (1977: 166). Heidegger’s insight was later developed by Henry Corbin in *Temple and Contemplation* (1986).

search for *qibla*. This search was both literal and metaphorical: it required a cultural digestion of the American environment and/or of orthodox Islam.

Muslim immigrants initially perceived America as a Christian country. They employed medieval juridical distinctions that divided the world into *dar al Islam* (the abode of Islam/peace) and *dar al harb* (the abode of war/chaos) (Haddad 2004: 32, Leonard 2003: 154). The initial application of Islamic *nomos* to American space, that is, the first appropriation of America by Muslims, conceived of America in its externality to Islam as a space of exception; Muslim presence in it was construed under the rubric of necessity (*darura*). Immigrants who came to the United States in the 1960's and 1970's wanted only to avoid the negative influence of American society (Schumann 2007: 5). This perception, however, changed over time (Haddad and Lummis 1987).

I leave an extended discussion of this change to the chapter on the transformation of Muslim discourses on America (Chapter 4). However, suffice it to say that in the beginning Muslims perceived America as an undifferentiated entity and a space of impurity. In particular, the students who constituted the institutional core of the immigrant Muslim population had a diasporic orientation; they saw America as a temporary waystation.

America was foreign to Muslims and Muslims were foreign to America. The initial conceptions of America in externality to Islam defined it as an anomic periphery. Legislating this anomic periphery meant, for example, extension of *qibla*, the Muslim directional order. The attempt to find the direction to Mecca in America is one way Muslims engaged with American space. Put differently, to appropriate America and turn



it into a navigable territory, Muslims had to connect Mecca and America through the Islamic rule of direction (*qibla*).

In theoretical terms, the Kaaba in Mecca and America occupy the two ends of the rule of *qibla*, since they both stand outside it. In other words, they are places of exception. Both characterized by their absence of structure, America is an external exception and the Kaaba is an internal exception.

As America has been temporarily and for practical reasons left outside the legislation, it forms an external exception in that it lies beyond the reach of the rule and remains in a juridical void. And because the rule has not yet conquered it, it is an anomic site where *multiple directions arise*. It remains bare geography, a nature yet to be converted into a culture. As a space over which the protective shield of the rule, the “sacred canopy” (Berger 1969) needs to be extended, America remains profane and risky. It emanates anomic terror. It causes confusion and disorientation. Practices in such a place fall under the rule of necessity and state of emergency where normal rules are unavailable. In this anomic space the differentiation of right direction from wrong direction has not yet been achieved: boundaries have not yet been definitively drawn. Therefore, religiously speaking, being in America generates anxiety, confusion and agoraphobia (Zerubavel 1991: 49) for immigrant Muslims because America appears as an unbounded and un-navigable environment.

### **The Storm and the Port: The Qibla Debate**

Throughout the history of Islam, Muslim astronomers devoted part of their work to establishing the principles for the determination of *qibla* and the making of instruments

such as the astrolabe, which were indispensable instruments of navigation and exploration. *Qibla* was thus always bound up with cultural and geographical frontiers. The question of *qibla* hardly ever occurs to people in Muslim-inhabited geographies today, as such questions have been resolved centuries ago. It is the mobility and dispersal of populations brought about by colonialism, globalization, and immigration that have given rise to Muslim minorities outside the traditional lands of Islam. These movements create the need to determine *qibla* in formerly unimaginable locations like America, Australia and New Zealand.

As we have said, most of the early immigrant mosques, including the first mosque in Detroit, faced east or southeast. In the seventies, as the number of mosques began to increase significantly in tandem with the rise in the number of Muslim immigrants, the question of *qibla* became an issue. In 1978, Muslim expert and NSF scientist, S. Kamal Abdali, published his *Prayer Schedules for North America*. Based on his expertise and research, Abdali argued that the *qibla* for North America was northeast. Supported by major Islamic organizations in the United States, the newly-reached conclusion that *qibla* in North America was northeast rather than southeast soon became the norm. Mosques made the required change to fix their directions. Muslims who used to face southeast would henceforth be facing northeast. The mosques that had *mihirabs* in the wall in the old direction left them untouched. They simply reorganized the layout of prayer rugs to redirect their congregations. But newly built mosques and mosques undergoing expansion or renovation adopted the new direction and carved their *mihirabs* accordingly. It is only in the oldest mosques that one can see the architectural scar of this reorientation.

Of the two mosques with two directions, the Albanian Islamic Center at Harper Woods, Michigan, is planning to rebuild or move to a new location and the Islamic Center of America has already done so. It has moved from its old place on Joy Road to a new mosque complex on Ford Road. The new mosque was completed in 2005. In one of my visits to the new mosque, I spoke about the old *qibla* with Eide Alawan. Alawan is an interfaith activist and community spokesperson for the Islamic Center. He usually complains about what he calls “immigrant” ways of doing things. A proud American-born Muslim, he always emphasizes values that Weber would call Protestant, like “punctuality.” In response to my question he said, “Tell you what, actually there is one guy who still thinks that *qibla* should be southeast. He’s an old guy. People don’t give up their habits that easily.”

In the early 1990s two scholars from the Arab world visited the United States and reignited what can be called the “*qibla* debate” with a pamphlet entitled *The Substantiation of the People of Truth that the Direction of Al-Qibla in the United States and Canada is to the Southeast*. In this book, the authors, Nachef and Kadi (1990), argued that for both jurisprudential and technical reasons, the direction of Mecca in North America was southeast. The authors also declared the prayers of people who had used the northeast direction invalid and asked for a return to the southeastern *qibla*. Imam Haroon of *Masjid un Nur* in Highland Park also remembered this controversy when he said, “Back in the late 1980’s two brothers from overseas wanted to change but we did not pay attention to them.”

Their disagreements mostly revolved around definitions in the religious texts and the technicalities of using maps. For example, what does it mean to be “facing Mecca?”

Such Qur'anic verses as “wherever you are, turn your faces towards Kaaba” (Qur'an, Al-Baqara: 150) could be interpreted in different ways. Apart from such jurisprudential disagreements, the technical dispute was between Mercator projection maps and gnomonic (spherical) projection maps. The puzzle was whether one should use the “rhumb line” or the “great circle” to determine the shortest distance between Mecca and America.

In response to their arguments and criticism, S. Kamal Abdali published an online article in 1997 titled “The Correct Qibla.” The discussion mushroomed on the websites of major Muslim organizations like the Islamic Society of North America. Some Muslim scholarly institutions outside the United States (e.g., Al Azhar University in Cairo) also became involved in the debate, issuing their own *fatwas* (legal rulings).

Participants in the debate tended to charge their opponents both with being scientifically incorrect and with trying to divide the community. For example, Waheed Younis, the author of the article, “*Qibla* in North America,” wrote:

This article is written to clarify the issue of correct direction of prayers (*qibla*) for Muslims in North America. Unfortunately, it has become a big issue and Muslims are being divided on it. It is also unfortunate that in this age of Mathematics, Geography and Computer when the Science of Navigation, Calculation and Cartography are reaching their pinnacle, and with the help of those tools, others did not have any problem finding the direction, navigating through and traveling to the Moon, we still do not have consensus on this small issue (Younis 2006).

The most recent contribution— which (like its predecessors) aspires to be the last word on the subject— comes from Nuh Ha Mim Keller, an American convert and religious scholar. Keller's book, *Port in a Storm: A Fiqh Solution to the Qibla of North America*, includes scientific illustrations and cites religious sources in Arabic. On the cover of the book is an image of an ancient astrolabe. In the book, Keller brings together

both religious arguments and specialized technical knowledge. His book is probably the most comprehensive work on the subject available in English.

Keller's objection to those who push for a *qibla* change back to the southeast, apart from jurisprudential reasons, is based on two grounds: the authority of science and the need for American Muslims to develop their own religious knowledge instead of relying on speculations from the overseas.

Islam is spreading to the far corners of the earth, and if the only way we can establish the *qibla* of the new mosque in Tierra del Fuego, for example, is by the visit of an impressive scholar from Algeria and hearing his opinion, the *qibla* will only last until an even more impressive scholar from Iraq arrives and gives the contrary opinion. People in our times are unable to accept such a process. The real world and not subjective personal preference must be our home port, and we can only put into it with religion and intelligence (Keller 2001: 175).

If America was a stormy sea where Muslims risked losing their bearings, according to Keller, the fault lay neither with the religion nor America, but the irrationality of those who failed to make the move from a personal understanding to a scientific one. Muslims would find their home port through rationality and autonomy from overseas "experts." Like Imam Shuaib and Eide Alawan, Keller treats the northeast direction as an objective fact. Northeast *qibla* inscribes itself both in the physical architecture of new mosques and the minds of communities who increasingly think of the northeast *qibla* as the standard, correct *qibla*. Once the northeast *qibla* is established as objective orthodoxy, it becomes commonsense and the southeast *qibla* is reduced to the level of subjective ideology. It gradually vanishes.

In the immigrant Muslim experience, finding the direction to Mecca is a matter of mentally penetrating into America and linking it to Mecca. A similar process took place in the African American Muslim experience, as well. In their case, the challenge was to

link their American experience to the center of Islam in Mecca. Various discursive and symbolic moves within the African American convert community—including a *qibla* change—brought them closer to their immigrant co-religionists.

### **Black Mecca and the *Bilalians***

The earliest Muslims in America were slaves. Of the enslaved Africans from West Africa, approximately twelve percent were Muslims from the region of Senegambia (Diouf 1998: 49). Among the many slave narratives that have come down to us today there are stories of Muslim slaves who struggled to maintain their religion against all odds. One example is Salih Bilali (Old Tom) of the Gullah Islands off the coast of Georgia, who was a respected leader and elder of slaves on a plantation. The grandson of Thomas Spalding, Bilali's master, reports that his grandfather's slaves were "devout Mussulmans, who prayed to Allah... morning, noon and evening." He also adds that Bilali "*faced east* to call upon Allah" (Diouf 1998: 62).

The stories of Muslim slaves that are available to us suggest that, in the absence of community and technical knowledge, Bilali and other Muslims turned towards the east when they prayed. One can identify several reasons for that. Most of the Muslim slaves brought to America were from West Africa, so Mecca in their consciousness was in the East. The slaves also came increasingly under the influence of Christian culture, so that east, the Holy Land, Jerusalem, and the sunrise tended to melt into one sacred direction. Muslim slaves' search for the direction towards Mecca overlapped with this imagination and it reinforced the perception of east as *qibla*.

Not only the direction but also the religious terminology was gradually subsumed under a new culture and language. When the descendants of Bilali were interviewed for a project that attempted to retrieve the oral history of Georgia's Sea Islands, they vaguely remembered some of the words their grandmothers uttered during prayers, but they appeared to them as indistinguishable exotic sounds such as "hakabara" (which researchers familiar with Islam later identified as "Allahu Akbar").

Islam not only gradually disappeared, in some instances it merged with Christianity. In 1860, a Muslim slave woman known as "Old Lizzy Gray" died in Edgefield County. Her obituary appeared on the front page of the Edgefield Advertiser on September 12, 1860. Her owner, Dr. E.J. Mims, wrote that she always said that "Christ built the first church in Mecca" (Muhammad 1998: 44).

The stories of Muslim slaves remained unknown for a very long time as few paid attention to the Muslim component of their identities. Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's *Roots* was a Muslim, although Haley's account downplays its Muslim elements (Haley 1976). Recent studies such as Allan Austin's *African Muslims in Antebellum America*, have been recovering the stories of Muslim individuals and their spiritual struggles. As Umar ibn Said, a slave from Fayetteville, North Carolina, wrote (in Arabic) in his 1831 autobiography: "When I came to the Christian country, my religion was the religion of Mohammed, the Apostle of God... And now I pray 'Our Father, etc.,' in the words of Jesus the Messiah" (Austin 1997: 16). A recent PBS documentary, *Prince Among Slaves* (2007), similarly tells the story of a Muslim Prince enslaved in America.

Unlike some Muslim communities in the Caribbean and South America, the Islam that came with African slaves to North America was not fated to survive.<sup>15</sup> But it left its traces in the memory and consciousness of African Americans. One example of this is to be found in the Gullah dialect of Georgia's Sea Islands, where transculturation of African languages and English produced a creole that combined elements from both (Turner 1949) including the survival of some Islamic terminology. Julie Dash's movie *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) recovers the oral history of Gullah-speaking slave communities, some prominent members of which were Muslim. Nonetheless, the contemporary African American experience of Islam must be considered more recent: it dates back to the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

The story of immigrants and their ways of finding their *qibla* is in some ways paralleled by those who were already Americans, yet looking for a *qibla*. African Americans who chose to become Muslim saw themselves as reclaiming the Muslim identity of their ancestors. This is best expressed in the extended title of the Nation of Islam: "*The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America.*" The Black Muslim movement was simultaneously a restoration of racial dignity and a reclamation of Islam.

These early Black Muslim communities were hybrid in many ways. They included elements from both Islam and Christianity. Even when the content was Islamic, oftentimes the form was Christian. Like their immigrant co-religionists, these Black Muslim communities also experienced gradual re-orientation and cultural fine tuning.

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<sup>15</sup> Samory Rashid argues against this common conclusion in (Rashid 2004: 55).

<sup>16</sup> Two organizations often referred to as representatives of proto-Islam in America are the *Moorish Science Temple* of Noble Drew Ali (1913) and the *Nation of Islam* (1930) led by Elijah Muhammad. Both organizations relied on a genealogical discourse and linked themselves to Muslim slaves and the history of Islam in Africa.



Two prominent Detroit mosques reflect the history of this transition: *Masjid Wali Muhammad* and the *Muslim Center of Detroit*.

The Muslim Center of Detroit was opened in 1985 and has much more in common with immigrant mosques than the older Masjid Wali Muhammad. What is now Masjid Wali Muhammad used to be called Muhammad Temple Number One under the Nation of Islam and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. The members of the Nation of Islam at the temple used to pray towards Chicago, where the headquarters of the Nation of Islam were located. Many practices of the Nation of Islam were incompatible with the orthodox practices of Muslims in the rest of the world. How did *Muhammad Temple Number One* become *Masjid Wali Muhammad* and the *Nation of Islam* become the *Muslim American Society*?

In a group interview with Imam Saleem Rahman of Masjid Wali Muhammad and his assistant Imam Gary Al Kassab, Imam Saleem described this transition.

Our temples were not mosques proper... We saw others as weird and they saw us as weird. We felt like Allah came to us with Master Farad. Allah came in the person of Farad and chose Honorable Elijah Muhammad as His messenger. The transition [after Warith Deen Muhammad assumed the leadership] was difficult for many of us. I thought this is “our” religion. Mine was very small, what I was thinking. This man was talking about the universal. Many of us thought we were Muslims proper [but] we were not. The imam said “most of y’all are Christians masquerading as Muslims.” We were being taught the Bible... The Qur’an was always held up as ‘the book to come.’ Many of us had it. We had it on our shelves. And Elijah Muhammad said “in time we will get to the Qur’an. Right now I am teaching from the Bible. (Interview, February 18, 2005)

At this point, the assistant imam intervened and said that “when Muhammad was mentioned in the Qur’an, we thought that it refers to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. When my brother became Muslim through immigrants we had discussions about that...”

Imam Saleem continued with what happened after Warith Deen Muhammad assumed the leadership of the Nation of Islam in 1975 after the death of his father:

This place used to be ‘Muhammad Temple Number One.’ In 1975 Imam Warith Deen Muhammad changed it into Masjid Wali Muhammad. All we did, we took out chairs and brought in carpets and *changed the direction from West to Qibla*.

I asked Imam Abdullah El Amin of the Muslim Center of Detroit, another mosque which follows the teachings of W.D. Muhammad, about the transition to orthodox Islam.

El Amin also emphasized the suddenness of the transformation:

You know, it’s almost like when the Prophet changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca, you know. So, on Linwood over there [that is, at Masjid Wali Muhammad—MB], they used to pray to the west, and they were praying to the west all those years, but Imam Mohammed said no, the direction is to Mecca. So instantly the whole community turned to face Mecca. It was almost the same as the Prophet receiving the revelation to change and instantly all the Muslims without question turned their qibla toward Mecca. So it was a very powerful event. I think...

When W.D. Muhammad assumed the leadership of the Nation of Islam he introduced several dramatic changes. Islam would no longer be “the black man’s religion” but a universal religion. It would be open to whites too. This move away from Nation of Islam doctrine towards mainstream Islam was symbolically crowned with the introduction of the word “Bilalian” as an alternative to Negro, black or Afro-American (Mamiya 1982: 138-152). The Nation’s newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, underwent a similar change under W. D. Muhammad’s leadership and became the *Bilalian News*.

African Americans, in their search for Mecca in America, thus found their *qibla* in a historical figure who was simultaneously African and Meccan: Bilal al Habashi (Bilal the Ethiopian). Bilal ibn Rabah was the first Black Muslim in history. A contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad, he became Muslim while he was a slave. After his conversion and later emancipation he assumed an honorable status as a companion of

the Prophet<sup>17</sup> and the first *muezzin* (caller to prayer). The figure of Bilal forged a perfect link between African Americans and Islam.<sup>18</sup> His story resonated with the Black experience in America.<sup>19</sup> The theme of Ethiopianism is also in harmony with Christian Biblical culture. Ethiopia is an ancient African kingdom with a long tradition of Christianity. Through the figure of Bilal, African American Muslims were simultaneously creating a channel of engagement with Islamic orthodoxy and remaining within the religious and racial discourse of the larger African American community.<sup>20</sup>

The very name of the organization, the Nation of Islam, was also changed-- not once but several times. In each re-naming one sees the elements of convergence with the universalism of mainstream Islam and more importantly a closer embrace of mainstream America. This becomes clear through the evolving names of the Nation of Islam: *Nation of Islam* (1930); *World Community of al Islam in the West* (1976); *American Muslim Mission* (1980); *The Ministry of W. D. Muhammad* (1985); *Muslim American Society* (1997). Warith Deen Muhammad's name and honorifics have also evolved in a similar direction. Soon after he became the leader of the organization his title was changed from *Supreme Minister* (1975) to *Chief Imam* (1976).

*Qibla* changes in both African American and immigrant Muslim histories, and various acts of naming and re-naming all bring the two lineages of American Islam closer together. In addition to the unification of *qibla*, there has been a growing compatibility

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<sup>17</sup> In Sunni tradition, the Prophet's companions have semi-sacred status as bearers of religious knowledge.

<sup>18</sup> A recent commentary on the intersection of Black and Muslim identities is Zaid Shakir's *Scattered Pictures: Reflections of an American Muslim* (2005: 63-76).

<sup>19</sup> When Dawud Walid, the executive director of CAIR-Michigan, gave a lecture to the members of Muslim Student Association on the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, he structured his narrative about the Muslim ummah around the figure of Bilal as a way of bridging the divide between African American and immigrant Muslim communities (February 2, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Another parallel movement is the Rastafarian movement. For the competition between the Bilalian and the Rastafarian movements, see Mazrui (2004: 121).

between the two groups' theological discourses. Initially ethnic or racial, they have both increasingly become religious. More importantly, their convergence also encourages further embrace of Americanness as an identification compatible with Islam.

Both immigrant scholars like Taha Jabir Al Alwani and indigenous leaders like W.D. Muhammad encourage the possibility of interpreting Islam in the context of its minority status in America (Al Alwani 2003). The search for an Islamic legal thinking that takes the minority status of Muslims seriously into account is an attempt at carving out autonomy for Muslims in the United States. The road to such a possibility is full of obstacles, though, and the discussions cannot always be reduced to immigrant versus native differences.

In the case of the *qibla* debate, for example, it is important to note that what appears to be a simple technical problem is rather a complex one. The debate between opposing views is a conflict between an "organic" (subjective) conception of space and a technical (objective) conception. Both sides can draw on sacred texts and prophetic traditions that confirm their approach. While it might be possible for the *qibla* debate to reach a technical resolution, we should remember that the debate is never purely rational or technical, for it is taking place under structural constraints such as the requirements of organized modern life in America and the imperative of unifying Muslims as a minority so that collective interests can be pursued. One such collective interest is the recognition of Muslim holidays in public calendars and institutional arrangements.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Many Muslims have difficulties getting days off for holidays because they themselves do not know exactly when the holiday starts. They are torn between two calendars, two ways of partitioning time: solar and lunar. The lunar calendar, which has been marginalized in practical life by the hegemony of the solar calendar in the Christian era, resurfaces on special religious days. Although both solar and lunar calendars are ways of partitioning time, they slice time differently. As a consequence, there is always a certain disjuncture between the two. The debate over moonsighting among American Muslims constitutes another interesting avenue of exploration.

One can see the gradual emergence of structure, order and orthodoxy in the evolution of names that both immigrant and convert Muslims gave to their religious institutions. They called their meeting places temples or halls: the earliest mosques in Detroit under the Nation of Islam were called temples and the early immigrant mosques, such as the one in Highland Park and the precursor of the Islamic Center of America, were called Muhammadan Hall and Hashemite Hall, respectively. Both communities initially congregated and prayed on Sundays instead of Fridays. They faced various directions during prayers, ranging from west to southeast. Their *qiblas* also eventually converged, a process of transformation whose traces are increasingly vanishing.

## **Conclusion**

Translation of Islam into the American context requires both spatial and temporal boundary work, where immigrants and converts alike engage in cultural fine tuning and seek convergence between their practices. In the formative, contested moment prior to the emergence of orthodoxy, there is no rule, only multiple practices. After one of those practices gains canonical status through codification and others are marginalized— as in the case of the northeast *qibla*— one observes the emergence of a rule and the subtle disappearance of symbolic violence into taken-for-granted (commonsense) reality. Muslims initially lived with a cacophony of directions: southeast, west, northeast and east. When the standard is produced through constitution of one claim as the commonsense or scientific fact, the symbolic violence that once left scars in the interiors of mosques and created an accent in the Muslim sense of direction assumes normality and naturalness. Now it has become constitutive and productive. It is taken for granted that

*qibla* is northeast. The transition from anomie to nomos is accomplished and the elimination of negative charisma achieved. What was once felt as symbolic violence, like speaking a new language, has now become “nature”, like a native language. This is the contrast between Imam Shuajb or Eid Alawan, who take the northeast *qibla* for granted, and the old man who still thinks that the southeast *qibla* is right. It is the contrast between the two old mosques with two mihrabs and the many new ones with only one. And it is the contrast between first generation immigrants and the American-born generations.

The direction of symbolic change for both immigrant Muslims of various kinds and W. D. Muhammad’s Muslim American Society has been a convergence towards orthodoxy in Islam. Yet this orthodoxy is not necessarily an orthodox Islam in general but one mediated by the American experience. In this convergence no party represents a preordained orthodoxy. Rather, orthodoxy is constituted through interaction and negotiation. This interaction and convergence makes possible the cultural settlement of Islam and leads to the crystallization of an American Islam. The contours of the development of American Islam can be traced through various sectors of American life that are being codified by Muslims. Those sectors include *qibla*, moonsighting, gender-based partitioning of space in the mosques, development of *halal* food standards, sporadic neighborhood debates (like the call-to-prayer controversies) and the subsequent settlement of the problems of mosque soundscapes. All represent moments and sites of a negotiation between Islam and its new American environment.

*Qibla* unification represents the symbolic unification of a community that is racially, ethnically, culturally and even linguistically divided. In this sense, the American context for Muslims of various backgrounds looks very much like the situation of

pilgrims in Mecca. Like American Muslims, pilgrims in Mecca come from various cultures, ethnicities, and language backgrounds but they are symbolically unified through the centrality of the Kaaba. Finding Mecca in America, therefore, is a story of the cultural settlement of Islam as an American religion in the eyes of Muslims. Whether Islam has become or will become an American religion in the eyes of non-Muslim Americans is another question entirely. The naturalization of Islam in America is contingent on the completion of the naturalization of America in Islam. Such a naturalization is made possible through the introduction of Islamic *nomos* in the form of Muslim directionality and the development of localized Muslim religious standards.

## CHAPTER 3

### The English Language and Islam: Genealogy of an Encounter

Etymologically both words *kalam* (“speech”) and *kalima* (“word”) derive from *kalm*, which the Arabic dictionaries define as *jarh*, which means to cut or wound. *Jarh* in turn is explained more generally to mean *ta'thir*, to leave traces and marks. –William Chittick (2007: 59)

#### Introduction

Unlike Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Urdu or Malay, English is not among the historically Muslim languages. It is basically a language that has no history of hosting Islam as either religion or culture. Only recently has English become a “Muslim language” in the sense that a significant number of people in the United States and across the globe speak it as their native language while practicing Islam as their religion/culture. The connection between language and culture is important because languages are embedded in the cultures of their speakers; linguistic and cultural categories inform and nurture one another. The challenge of translation from one language to another becomes more acute when the cultures in question are dramatically different. In such situations, linguistic translation becomes a cultural reinterpretation. A question naturally arises: what happens when a set of practices and its attendant vocabulary adopts a new, culturally alien language as its habitat? Does the language put limitations on the culture? How does the culture or religion carve its own space in the language?

Today the English language is the *lingua franca* of Muslims in the diaspora. Diasporic Islam is not only communicated but, more importantly, increasingly



“produced” in English. For instance, Hamza Yusuf, a prominent American Muslim scholar, is popular among Scandinavian Muslim youth (Schmidt 2005). The Islamic Center of America in Dearborn hosts speakers from Australia. One of the most popular convert public intellectuals among American Muslim youth is Abdulhakim Murad (Tim Winter), who lives in England and teaches at Cambridge. The link among all these people spatially removed from one another is Islam and English. Unfortunately, both the English language, which is new to Islam, and the mutual influence between English and Islam are taken for granted. The traces of their encounter increasingly vanish as Muslims are becoming naturalized. The encounter between Muslims and the English language is a neglected issue in the scholarship on Islam in America.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is crucial for delineating the contemporary nature of American or globalized Islam because of the tensions and privileges it engenders.

In this chapter, I discuss the cultural implications of the encounter between the English language and Islam. Examining both its historical and contemporary moments, I explore the impact of English on the understanding of Islam and the transformative appropriation of English by American Muslims. In other words, I investigate the ways in which Muslims perceived the English language in the past and how they now make it a Muslim language in the English-speaking American society where they are a minority. The framework in which I work is not linguistic, but rather a cultural sociology based on ethnographic research into the English language in relation to its Muslim speakers. As such, it investigates an important dimension of citizenship, namely the process of linguistic membership in a society and how Muslims overcome the symbolic violence incurred in their gradual immersion in the English language.

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<sup>22</sup> The only exception I am aware of is a two page note in (Metcalf 1994: xv).

## Linguistic Nomos and Symbolic Violence

Key to the discussion that follows is the idea of language acquisition as a form of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to the operation of naming or re-naming.<sup>23</sup> It is the imposition of a *nomos*, the formative and collective form of which is language. Before further expanding the idea of symbolic violence, let me first explain what *nomos* means. *Nomos* is a crucial concept for understanding the relationship between order and orientation. Carl Schmitt describes *nomos* as “the Greek word for the first measure of all subsequent measures, for the first land-appropriation understood as the first partition and classification of space, for the primeval division and distribution” (Schmitt 2003: 67). Bourdieu similarly defines *nomos* as “a word that is narrowly translated as ‘law’ and would be better rendered as ‘constitution,’ a term which better recalls the arbitrary act of institution, or as ‘principle of vision and division’” (Bourdieu 2000: 96).

As an imposition of *nomos*, symbolic violence can be of two types.<sup>24</sup> First, it may be constitutive. Such symbolic violence is productive in the sense that it establishes boundaries and generates entities by naming them. This kind of symbolic violence is the work of the limits into which one is born. Pure, constitutive symbolic violence is the primary form of classification; it is what Bourdieu (1984: 466) calls the *habitus*. One example of constitutive symbolic violence would be a person’s relationship to his or her culture and native language. The learning of a first language is pure symbolic violence in

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<sup>23</sup> Symbolic violence is not necessarily violence by other means. For example, what is symbolic violence in the act of name-calling? That the person is called a name that she does not want to be called is certainly a symbolic “violence.” But the concept of symbolic violence refers not only to schoolyard taunts and racial name-calling but also parental name-giving. Therefore, it may not be and usually is not perceived as something negative or harmful.

<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu himself does not distinguish between the two types of symbolic violence presented here. The distinction between ‘constitutive’ and ‘restrictive’ types of symbolic violence is mine.

the sense that it is not the imposition of boundaries on an already formatted surface, but the first formatting of that surface. This symbolic inscription of culture or language is constitutive and productive. It produces subjects.

The second type of symbolic violence is the imposition of boundaries on entities whose existence and shape precede the newly imposed limits. It has a restrictive, if not always repressive, character. Unlike the first type of symbolic violence, it is felt and can leave scars on its subjects. These scars include accent in speech (an immigrant's broken English), incompatibility of body language (Bourdieu's Bearnese peasants who cannot dance), discrepancy between thought and expression (Muslim clerics' inability to explain certain elements of Islam in English) and a general sense of disorientation (popularly known as culture shock). Speakers of second languages and practitioners of new religions—where a new culture is superimposed upon an existing one—are subject to such symbolic violence. Most immigrants and converts subject themselves to this kind of violence voluntarily.

The difference between the two types of symbolic violence stems from whether symbolic violence is exercised for the first time or not. The first one is constitutive, the second, restrictive. It is often a matter of time for the imposition of boundaries to lose its impositional character and be regarded as natural. It usually does not happen in one generation, but does so over two or three generations. This happens when the effects of symbolic violence come to be perceived as natural and objective. Cultural settlement in a new language therefore can be defined as the eventual resolution of the tension between the old linguistic/cultural grid (*habitus*) and the new one (*habitat*).

## Language as a Habitat

A native language is home. Someone else's language can be a prison. The native speaker feels at home in the world because the world is *in* him, in the form of *habitus* (Bourdieu 2000: 143) The difference between a native language and a second language is that we are born into the former and defined by it. There is a perfect correspondence between our habitus and our habitat, our perception of the world and the world itself. Everything seems natural, harmonious. We become what we are and the world appears to us as it is through our native language. But when we speak another ("foreign") language we are in a foreign land. Things do not seem natural and harmonious. A gap between our internal world (habitus) and this external world (our new habitat) emerges. Our effort to bridge this gap causes a lapse in time and the ordeal of internal translation. We do not feel at home; we stay on mental guard. Our turning of the new environment into a home takes time and may face obstacles from the ontological filter and restrictions of the new language. Once the new habitat sediments in our bodies, it becomes the new habitus for us; only then do we feel at home again.

If, as Saussure argues (1959: 68), the essence of language is "convention," then language cannot exist outside the culture of its speakers. That is, convention is a temporal ground. This, however, does not mean that the existing culture cannot change; on the contrary, acculturation is always possible. But it means that until sedimentation or convention—which is the ground for language—is achieved through time and across community, any new acculturation will "feel" unnatural, non-standard and strange. The mental fields and ontological categories carved by each language may not correspond neatly with those of another. In situations of immigration or displacement, a discordance

may emerge between *habitus* and *habitat*. The impact of finding oneself in “another” language is that the symbolic violence that is invisibly exercised in the production of our “native” language (in a way that precedes our history and awareness) all of a sudden surfaces in our consciousness and becomes visible.

Therefore, put differently, symbolic violence is the introduction of a (new) *nomos*. The transition from one language to another may cause linguistic anomie<sup>25</sup>, where the original *nomos* is no longer valid and the new *nomos* is not yet fully internalized or naturalized. The original *nomos* which is home (*habitus*) to us now is overlaid by a new one (a gradually sedimenting *habitat*) which may feel like a prison. Over time and through naturalization/adjustment the new language and its prison-like feeling [inducing symbolic violence] is overcome and replaced by a feeling of a new home --a new *habitus*, which is a product of the incorporation of *nomos* (Bourdieu 2000:143). This transition is almost never perfect as the old home survives in the new one in the form of accent and delay. The naturalization process is an erasure of the disjuncture and an articulation of a new harmony between *habitus* and *habitat*. When fully inhabited, a language becomes a true instrument (like a glove) instead of a necessary but uncomfortable one (like an ill-fitting shoe).

This chapter captures a vanishing aspect of the cultural settlement of Muslims in American society and culture. Like the problem of the codification of space (i.e., finding *qibla*), the encounter with English belongs to the set of challenges Muslims faced in the initial stages of their entry into American culture: it is part of the genesis of American Islam. Oftentimes, these problems and challenges are forgotten by the later generations

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<sup>25</sup> Durkheim used the concept to refer to the weakening or absence of normative standards in modern society (Durkheim 1951: 241). A narrowly understood concept in sociology, anomie etymologically means the absence of *nomos*.

for whom all things historical<sup>26</sup> now appear quite natural and unremarkable. But scholarship on Islam in America needs to avoid taking them for granted.

### **Two Encounters, Then and Now**

The process of globalization has led to the spread of English as a global language and the spread of Islam as a global religion. The latter is also responsible for the emergence of Muslim minorities in English-speaking, historically non-Muslim countries such as the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. The framework with which Muslims have perceived and interpreted the English language has also shifted over time. Two moments can be distinguished in the encounter between English and Islam. These are the historical encounter, marked by colonialism and Christian missionaries, and the contemporary encounter, marked by globalization and Muslim minorities.

### **Historical Encounter: Colonialism and Christianity**

#### *English: Colonial and Christian*

The early encounters between Muslims and the English language took place in colonial contexts. Muslims who were colonized by Europeans identified their languages with Christianity, domination and cultural conversion. Not only Muslims but all colonized peoples harbored a strong suspicion towards the language of the colonizer. The colonizer's language was part of a larger colonial discourse where cultures and languages were placed in a hierarchy. It is not surprising that the first chapter of Frantz Fanon's classic book, *Black Skin White Masks*, is on language. Early on he notes not only how

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<sup>26</sup> I use the term "historical" here to draw attention to the historicity, contingency and constructedness of these experiences rather than the obvious fact that they happened in the past and/or they are in the way of becoming past.

“mastery of the colonizer’s language affords remarkable power” but also how it represents a tragic loss of authenticity. He observes that

Every colonized people –in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality- finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation. (Fanon 1967: 18)

That anticolonial movements have an ambivalent relationship with the language of the colonizer has a great deal to do with the colonial context, where the identity and authenticity of the colonized is balanced against the seductive power of the colonizer’s language. In the case of Muslims, where the difference in language is paired with a difference in religion, suspicion towards the language of the colonizer becomes inevitable. In other words, the colonizer’s language never comes to the colonized independently and simply as a language. It is never a means of communication alone. Rather it comes initially in a tightly knit bundle with colonial domination and its cultural apparatus—including Christianity and missionary education.

When Islam and the English language came into contact in colonial environments, English was accordingly seen as the language of “the colonizer” and “the Christians.”<sup>27</sup>

As Ali Mazrui, a prominent scholar of Africa, notes,

The equation of the English language with [Christian] missionary education was a major factor in conditioning Islamic attitudes towards it. Muslims became suspicious of the English language on the basis of a presumed guilt by association. This was aggravated by the sense of cultural defensiveness which developed among Muslim communities. (Mazrui 1971: 180)

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<sup>27</sup> Even today Christian missionaries use the prestige and power of English to spread their religious beliefs in many parts of the world. This in turn reinforces the perceived relationship between English and Christianity. In a strange twist, Muslim missionaries also use the teaching of English to enhance their prestige and persuasiveness (e.g. the work of Fethullah Gulen community schools in Central Asia).

Thus, learning English historically meant learning the language of Christian missionaries or that of the colonizers. “Being associated with conquest and colonialism, English was seen as inherently inhospitable to Islam and as syntactically and discursively different from any of the major Islamic languages” another scholar writes (Malak 2005: 2). In other words, due to the historical baggage of colonialism and Christianity, English has been perceived by many Muslims as a “*kafir*” (infidel) language (Pennycook 1994: 314). This perception—which has dramatically changed over time—did not make the distinction between learning a language and adopting its culture.

If the Christian convictions of English speakers led Muslims to approach the language with suspicion, how did colonialism affect Muslims’ appropriation and use of the English language? If English entered the Muslim imagination and experience through colonization, how did this shape the ways in which Muslims entered the discursive world of English? This question leads us to a striking dimension of the encounter between Islam and the English language.

### *Diasporic Islam: An Identity-centric Islam*

The first Islamic texts written in English or translated into English and made available to English-speaking audiences were produced by Muslims living in colonized lands, notably India and Egypt. The most famous example is Abul Ala Mawdudi<sup>28</sup> who, together with Sayyid Qutb, is considered among the founding figures of modern political Islamism. Colonial background informed the ways people constructed themselves and more importantly it impacted their articulation of religion. Even the mere use of English

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<sup>28</sup> Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) is the founder of *Jamaat-e-Islami* in British India. Mawdudi’s works are often to be found in American Muslim mosque libraries. This holds true for African American mosques as well.



language in the communication of religion and social issues inadvertently put authors and the users of that language in dialogue with the colonizing culture, thereby inviting a hidden transcript of *anticolonialism*. Hence, the English language was not only a means of communication for people who were colonized, but this fact shaped the content and deployment of texts written in English. If so, what can be said about the nature of Islam as it was constructed in texts written in English?

Early Islam in English was marked by postcolonial nationalism and a sense of displacement. The audiences of such texts were either displaced Muslims speaking English or Muslims subjected to colonial rule. The Islam produced in the English language can thus be defined as a “diasporic Islam.” Consequently, one characteristic of Islam in the English language is that it approaches Islam not as religion—or not only as religion—but as an *identity*. This distinction becomes harder to detect in our age of identity politics, not to mention in the context of the scholarly tendency to reduce religion to identity.

The encounter between the English language and Islam was mediated by the colonial experience and produced an identity-centric Islam, which at times would culminate in Muslim nativism. It is this diasporic foundation that arguably finds an echo in contemporary Muslim radicalism in the Western world. The impact finds expression in the anticolonial baggage of early writings. Intellectuals or scholarly figures who wrote in English or whose writings were translated early on into English were anticolonial thinkers. They often placed Islam in opposition to Western culture and civilization. And, not surprisingly, they produced a totalistic understanding of Islam which later became the ground for political Islamism. One might ask why this anticolonial sentiment and reaction

had a lasting impact. I contend that this moment was, to use Bourdieu's terms, an "inaugural moment" (Bourdieu 2000: 95) in the institution of Islam in the English language. For practical reasons of path-dependency, those writings and their diasporic Islam had a lasting influence on how Muslims entering into the sphere of English through immigration (and those English speakers entering the sphere of Islam through conversion) made sense of themselves and their new environment.

If one walks into the libraries of most of the mosques in North America— as I have done often of late<sup>29</sup>— in pursuit of textual sources of American Islam, one is likely to notice the presence of works by Mawdudi, Qutb, and many others. Yet only a decade or two ago, the libraries of Islamic centers were largely empty of English-language books. The few books available would most likely be those of Mawdudi and Qutb. The reason for this is not necessarily ideological. As a matter of fact, the wide presence of such books and the absence of others was due to the unavailability of Islamic works in English. Those that were available, therefore, became common<sup>30</sup> and later classic. And they exercised a certain influence on American mosque culture and global Islam in general. Although there is today a proliferation of new Islamic works produced by indigenous American Muslims, the works of Mawdudi and Qutb continue to enjoy the status of classics of Islam in English.

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<sup>29</sup> In a recent visit to Detroit Muslim Center, a predominantly African-American mosque with a vibrant community and leadership, while checking the books on display and for sale after the Friday prayer I was not surprised to see Mawdudi's book, *Toward Understanding Islam* (Mawdudi, nd).

<sup>30</sup> As noted by Barbara Metcalf, "Islamic bookshops in Washington DC, Durban, London and Karachi will likely carry the same range of English books produced by English-speaking Muslims throughout the world" (Metcalf 1994: xv).



Figure 3.1. A typical mosque library shelf. This one, at the Tawheed Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan, includes Sayyid Qutb (*Milestones*), Abul A’la Mawdudi (*Towards Understanding Islam*) and Muhammad Asad (*The Road to Makkah*).

A good illustration of the place of such works in the imagination of American Muslims can be traced in a recent statement by Dawud Walid. Walid is an African-American Muslim and native of Detroit who is a vice imam at a mosque affiliated with Warith Deen Muhammad (Elijah Muhammad’s son); he is also the director of the local chapter of CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations),<sup>31</sup> a Muslim advocacy group. When asked which authors he most likes to read, Walid said that he reads “Sayyid Qutb, Imam Khomeini, Maulana Mawdudi, Ismail Faruqi and Imam Warith Deen Muhammad” (A. James, Interview with Dawud Walid, *The Muslim Observer*, January 6-12, 2006). Although Imam Khomeini and Imam Warith Deen Muhammad are not technically diasporic, the remaining names are diasporic Muslims who produced Islamic works either

<sup>31</sup> For an extended discussion of CAIR, see Chapter 5. An extended profile of Walid is located in Chapter 6.

in English or for English-speaking Muslims. What connects an African American Muslim born in Detroit to Muslim scholar/activists from India and Egypt of decades ago? The English language. I shall further develop the relationship between the English language and postcolonial Muslim intellectuals when I discuss the case of Ismail Faruqi and his approach to English.

In short, the impact of colonialism and the English language on Muslims resulted in an anticolonial culture and identity-centric, diasporic understanding of Islam. Although the early Muslim intellectuals who wrote in or were translated into English successfully overcame their suspicion toward the English language, this was achieved at the price of turning Islam into an “identity” deployed in opposition to Western culture. This fact can also be restated from the other direction, as Mazrui does: “Although learning English will certainly lead to a certain degree of Westernization, it was the English educated, those who could speak the colonizers’ language, who came to articulate anticolonial sentiments” (Mazrui 1975 quoted in Mohd-Asraf 1996: 367).

### **Contemporary Encounter: Globalization and Muslim Minorities**

As noted earlier, the story of the relationship between Islam and the English language is marked by two large-scale phenomena: colonialism and globalization. While the former characterizes the historical encounter of Muslims with the English language, the latter describes an ongoing process. Similarly, while the Muslim attitude toward the English language during the colonial encounter was one of rejection, in the contemporary world, it is increasingly becoming one of acceptance. Unlike the colonial situation, where English was the language of the colonizer and of Christianity, today Muslims are in the

process of making English a Muslim language and detaching it from its colonial past. It has also become the *lingua franca* for a significant number of Muslims.

Globalization has brought English and Islam into closer contact. Once total strangers, globalization has turned them into friend and foe at the same time. While English allows for the articulation of a global Islam, becoming a vessel for its dissemination, the same English is often presented as an antidote to the international terrorism associated with Islam.<sup>32</sup> Globalization of English and globalization of Islam have dramatically changed the interaction of both. English is no longer seen by many outsiders as tied to any culture or nation: it has now become the property of the entire world.<sup>33</sup> The same can be said for Islam. Both English and Islam are now at large.

Today one can speak of two ways in which Muslims think about the English language in relation to Islam. These are the issues of “English in Islam” and “Islam in English,” respectively. The first issue has to do with carving a space for English in Islam and among Muslims. This problem arises at the periphery of the language, in Muslim majority contexts where English is a foreign language. The second one has to do with carving a space for Islam within the English language and Western culture. This issue appears at the periphery<sup>34</sup> of Islam, in Muslim minority contexts. These two approaches also mark the gradual immersion of Muslims in the English language. In the beginning, English was external to Islam and was treated as something that had to be

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<sup>32</sup> For example, English has been receiving particular attention from the US government. The Bush administration seems to have engaged in promoting the English language against Islamic extremism. The *Washington Post* reported the recent change in school curricula in Qatar as “more English, less Islam.” (Susan Glasser, “Qatar reshapes its schools, putting English over Islam” *Washington Post*, 2/2/2003).

<sup>33</sup> According to the British daily *The Independent*, within 10 years half of the world will be speaking English. (James Burleigh, “English to be spoken by half of the world’s population within 10 years, *The Independent*, December 9, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Many Muslims would object to the distinction of center and periphery for Islam since it is theologically not tied to any location. Nevertheless, the geographies where Islam has a recent presence despite its historical presence elsewhere can be defined as the periphery of Islam.

accommodated/legitimized. Later, when Muslims became fully embedded in the English language through immigration and naturalization, it was Islam that seemed external to their setting (habitat) and in need of accommodation.

*English in Islam: Language as a Tool*

This pragmatic approach to English is a direct outcome of economic globalization and focuses on the instrumentality of English as the language of globalization and technology. It emerges out of Muslim majority contexts and is best illustrated by the case of Malaysia. It comes as no surprise that Malaysia, a Muslim nation that has embraced economic globalization, is at the same time the first and perhaps the only nation to host a conference specifically dealing with the relationship between Islam and English. Held in 1996 at the International Islamic University in Malaysia, this conference was presented as a response to the needs of Muslims in a globalizing world where the English language plays an increasingly crucial role. The interaction between Islam and English, the two globalizers, was deployed in terms of a parallelism: Jalal Uddin Khan, the co-editor of the published proceedings of the conference, noted that the conference was “perhaps the first of its kind in the world.” He then juxtaposed Islam and English as follows:

Neither of them remained confined to the place of its origin, having reached far and wide across the languages and cultures of the world. Both are equally global and pluralistic, with the result that Islam today does not mean whatever is Arab only and English whatever is Western or Christian. There are Arab Christians as there are English-speaking Muslims or Muslims who are native English speakers. English has been the most widely used means of expression and communication as Islam has been the fastest growing or most resurgent religion in today’s world.” (Khan and Hare 1996: x)

The timing, location and themes of the conference reflected the nature of the transition that Muslim nations like Malaysia were undergoing. From a framework of colonialism, Malaysia had moved to one of globalization, where English was being embraced as an imperative of development and progress. One could even surmise here a certain concurrence, if not complicity, between Islam and the globalization of English (Karmani 2003b). Many Malay Muslims believed that “when we learn English, we will be rewarded by Allah” because “when one seeks knowledge or learns another language, one earns God’s pleasure” (Mohd-Asraf 2005: 111). Thus learning English was not only Islamically legitimate but also desirable. In the words of African Muslim Dahiru M. Argungu,

Muslims definitely need English today, in particular, in education. Apart from education, English is a strategic bridge linking Muslims with a vast English-speaking non-Muslim world with great potentials for outreach *da’awah*<sup>35</sup> activities, business and international relations (Argungu 1996: 336).

The following quote from another participant of the conference brings out how the suspicion toward English was overcome and highlights the role postcolonial Muslim thinkers played in appropriating the language:

It is possible to be highly proficient in English and still maintain one’s identity as Muslims. In fact, there are many Muslims from among our contemporaries as well as those in our past, such as Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman, Sayyid Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Ismail Faruqi, to name but among the most prominent ones, who are highly proficient in English and who have used their ability in the language for the purpose of Islam (Mohd-Asraf 1996: 363).

In the approach championed by the Malaysian conference, the English language was appropriated for Muslim purposes of global economic competitiveness, propagation

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<sup>35</sup> *Da’wah* is the Arabic word for service and propagation of Islam. An important idiom in the discourse of English speaking Muslims and essential element in the repertoire of diasporic Islam.

of Islam, and the fulfillment of a religious requirement about gaining knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

English was thus detached from its Christian-colonial baggage and embraced as a tool for economic development and religious service. This treatment of English as an instrument of development in the age of globalization neutralized the negative history of the language. Yet English still remained external to the Muslim context, something to be incorporated and used. This was significantly different from the next approach which emerged at the “center” of the English-speaking world, where Muslims lived as minorities.

### *Islam in English: Accommodating Islam*

The second way in which Muslims thought about the English language was related to the postcolonial immigration and the rise of English-speaking Muslim minorities in Anglophone societies. In this case, the use of English was no longer optional—even when suspicions toward English lingered—they derived from a concern about its capacity to accommodate Islam. The question here was how to make English a Muslim language. The following section discusses two articulations of “Islam in English” and notes two moments in the cultural settlement of Islam in the linguistic habitat of America.

### **Faruqi’s Project of “Islamic English”**

#### *A Biography of Diasporic Islam in America*

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<sup>36</sup> Malaysian Muslim scholar Al-Attas, along with many other Muslim scholars before him, classifies the learning of other languages as *fard kifayah* (a communal obligation), “which means that there has to be a certain number of educated Muslims who should master certain languages so that they can acquire the knowledge that could be obtained through those languages” (Mohd-Asraf 2005: 115).



Founded in 1982, the *Islamic Society of North America* (ISNA) is currently the largest Muslim national organization in the United States. ISNA was born of the fact that many Muslim students who came to America to study ended up not going back. As their plans to return home gradually faded away, they decided to build institutions that would support their diasporic life. The first major Muslim organization and nucleus of immigrant Muslim institution-building in the United States was, after all, the *Muslim Student Association* (MSA). Despite the commonsense impression, MSA is not a branch of ISNA, rather ISNA came out of MSA.

Ismail Raji al Faruqi's (1921-1986) biography is, in a sense, also the history of immigrant Muslim experience in America. Not only did he articulate a vision for the Muslim community in his writings, he also played a key role in its institutionalization. Most of the institutions he was involved with as either founder or promoter are now major national organizations: the *Muslim Student Association* (MSA), the *Islamic Society of North America* (ISNA) and the *International Institute of Islamic Thought* (IIIT). Faruqi was also the first president and founder of the *Association of Muslim Social Scientists* (AMSS).

Faruqi was a Palestinian refugee who came to the United States to pursue his academic studies. He received a doctorate in philosophy in 1952 from the University of Indiana. He wrote extensively on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although initially an Arab nationalist (Faruqi 1962), he gradually abandoned his Arabism in favor of Islamism. Faruqi's ideological orientation and intellectual identity, both in its Arabist and Islamist phases, were in many ways postcolonial. After failed attempts to intellectually articulate a culturally essentialist idea of Arabism, he found in Islam what he had been looking for: a

non-western universalism and authenticity. The guiding theme of his intellectual career was an urge to create an authentic ground for himself (and other Muslims) outside of Western discourse. The diversity of the Muslim student community with which he interacted contributed to his gradual transition to Islamic universalism. He saw in the presence of Muslim students in America the possibility of a pure *ummah* (community of Muslims).

As a visionary intellectual and community leader, Faruqi articulated a diasporic conception of Muslimness where ethnic and geographical origins were to be transcended in favor of an Islamic universalism. His distinctly diasporic orientation treated America as a precious meeting point for Muslims from all over the world. Although they were in America (as students), they were nevertheless oriented towards the Muslim lands. Most of the institutions initiated by Faruqi and his colleagues had transnational and diasporic names—their community and institutions were “in” America, but they were not necessarily “American”.

His colleagues, some of whom I had the opportunity to meet during my visit to the IIIT in Herndon, Virginia, and at the annual conferences of AMSS, have specialized in such varied disciplines as Islamic studies, finance, and political science. Even though all are American educated, they are more inclined to see things in a transnational framework. (Not surprisingly, one of the senior members of the IIIT told me during a conversation that he had visited more than hundred countries, something which struck me as quite diasporic and not quite American). The legacy of Faruqi looms large over IIIT, AMSS, and ISNA. His contribution to Islamic thought is so significant as to constitute an exception: while American Muslims are more likely to “import” Islamic knowledge from

overseas, Faruqi is perhaps the only<sup>37</sup> thinker whose work had a decisive impact on Muslims in other parts of the world. What was Faruqi's contribution that could be exported from America to overseas Muslim contexts?

Faruqi's main project, which informed much of his institution-building work, was the idea of "Islamization of knowledge" (Faruqi 1982). This project was based on the assumption that modern science and knowledge needs to be rehabilitated so as to be compatible with the Islamic conception of the world. Despite (or perhaps because of) its instant popularity among Muslims at the time, the Islamization of knowledge project was a very ambitious one. As an epistemological critique of Western science and its metaphysical presuppositions, Islamization of knowledge was a reluctant engagement with Western modernity.

*The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)* was established to serve this agenda. The Muslim students attracted to this project were to obtain Western knowledge, but "Islamicize" it upon taking it back to their home countries. In this way, they would become agents of an epistemological rectification (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004: 72). When it became clear that many of these students were not actually going back to their countries of origin, their presence in America inspired individuals like Faruqi to dream of a Muslim *ummah* here. This microcosmos of the greater Muslim *ummah* was to be based in America, yet still oriented toward the Muslim world.

Faruqi recognized early on that the common language for all these Muslims coming from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds was not Arabic but English. In other words, this emergent community was tied together by their Muslim identity and

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<sup>37</sup> A list of American-based Muslim thinkers who have influenced overseas Muslim intellectual life would certainly include important scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Fazlur Rahman. Yet, in my judgment the influence of Faruqi is far greater than others'.

shared American experience. Faruqi published a small book in 1986 in his “Islamization of Knowledge Series” that dealt with the question of English. This programmatic essay bore the title *Toward Islamic English* (Faruqi 1986).

### *Toward Islamic English*

Faruqi’s *Toward Islamic English* does not even ask whether Muslims can or should use English language, this is already treated as given. The question, rather, is how to make the English language sensitive to the culture and worldview of Muslims. What is needed, Faruqi argues, is an “Islamic English.” Faruqi defines Islamic English as “the English language modified to enable it to carry Islamic proper nouns and meanings without distortion, and, thus to serve the linguistic needs of Muslim users of the English language” (Faruqi 1986: 7). But who are the Muslim users of English? Faruqi answers:

Muslim users of the English language are, first, the Muslim citizens and permanent residents of the English-speaking countries, namely, the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. To these, the non-citizen Muslim students should be added. The term also includes the Muslim citizens and permanent residents of those countries around the world where English is official language, such as Pakistan, India, Ceylon, Malaysia, the Philippines in Asia, and Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and others in Africa and around the globe (Faruqi 1986: 7).

For Faruqi there is a serious problem in the relationship between Islam and the English language and it needs an urgent intervention.

The present situation of the English language –when it expresses matters pertaining to Islam, its culture, history and civilization, to the Muslim World or the Muslims, whether used by Muslims or non-Muslims- is chaotic. It constitutes an intellectual and spiritual disaster of the highest magnitude. And it carries a universal injustice against the human spirit (Faruqi 1986: 8).

Giving examples of how Muslim names are “mutilated” in transliteration, Faruqi calls for a creative appropriation of the language on the part of Muslims. According to him, Muslim speakers need to transform the English language at two levels: transliteration and translation.

The question of transliteration appears in the absence of standardization. There are multiple uses and no central power to choose which usage is legitimate. Some Arabic terms that are increasingly used in English are often spelled differently. For example, should the Arabic term for Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca be spelled *hajj* or *hadj*? Is it Muhammad or Mohamed? Even the name of the religion itself still begs standardization; is it Islam or Islaam?

The problems faced are not limited to transliteration. Through standardization and codification, Faruqi argues, transliteration problems can be eliminated. It should be noted that Faruqi insists on a scholarly transliteration and direct use of Arabic words in English. In other words, not only should their transliteration be fixed, but they should also not be translated. Many Arabic words, he says, are not translatable into English and many others are rendered into English only with difficulty. Furthermore, Muslims cannot rely on the orientalist’s translations of Islamic terms. “The orientalist may have used such translations with impunity because for them it is a foregone conclusion that all Islamic meanings must fit themselves under Western categories” (Faruqi 1986: 11). There are certain concepts in Islam which cannot be translated. “To give an English translation of them is to reduce; and often to ruin, those meanings” (Faruqi 1986: 12).

Faruqi—and other Muslim intellectuals such as Naquib al Attas, who were influenced by his ideas—argue that language reflects ontology, that is, the nature of truth

and reality as understood by a religion or culture (Mohd-Asraf 2005: 114). They also emphasize that the languages of all Muslim peoples have been infused by the basic Islamic vocabulary, which projects a distinctly Islamic worldview. Therefore, the Islamic ontology and conception of the world cannot be properly expressed through the English language unless it is adjusted.<sup>38</sup> The adjustment that Faruqi suggests in his Islamic English, in the words of Argungu, “is a remedial measure which aims at *bending* the English language to accommodate” Islam (Argungu 1996: 332) [italics mine].

The lack of exact correspondence between the ontology of the English language and the ontology of Islam can be illustrated in several registers. Faruqi himself provides some of them. For example, the word “prayer” does not distinguish between *dua* (spontaneous supplication) and *salat* (the five daily fixed-time prayers). It collapses the two categories into one and erases the ontological distinction between the two. The same can be said about “alms-giving” which fails to distinguish between *zakat* (the annual obligatory public welfare tax) and *sadaqah* (altruistic, voluntary charity) (Faruqi 1986: 11-12).

There can also be conceptual misfits. For instance, some Muslims may find the expression “good luck” to be un-Islamic because it implies that things happen by luck. Similarly, some Muslims might find themselves uncomfortable with the use of the future tense<sup>39</sup> in English because “when native speakers of English make reference to future, they do not feel a need to ‘soften the arrogant assumption’ that the future will occur, and appeal to the benevolence of God on such an occasion by adding ‘God

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<sup>38</sup> Muslim critics like Sohail Karmani, the editor of TESOL Islamia, an online journal, find this approach essentialist and inadequate because “the language informs thought and at the same time thought informs language” (Karmani, 2003b).

<sup>39</sup> Suhail Karmani parodies this problem of “future tense” in an interesting essay, “Future Im-Perfect” (Karmani 2003a).

willing’”(insha’allah) (Mohd-Asraf 1996: 355). This point is exemplified in the following paragraph from Faruqi’s *Toward Islamic English*, where he frames the purpose of Islamic English as a spiritual rehabilitation of the English language for Muslim users and performs what is suggested here by inserting “insha’allah” in the future-tense sentence:

In modern times, the English language stands in need of the percepts and values of Islam which only the Qur’anic language can provide. Constant use of their Arabic form will help to shield the English-speaking Muslims from the onslaught of materialism, utilitarianism, skepticism, relativism, secularism and hedonism that the last two hundred years have established firmly in English consciousness. And it will –*insha’Allah*- inject a reforming and salutary influence into the consciousness of all English speaking Muslims, pulling them out of their tragic predicament in modern times (Faruqi 1986: 14-15).

There are also religious words that are secularized and universalized in the language which Muslims may find alienating. Such Christian words used in a non-religious sense include “bible, biblical, christen, christian, Christian name” (Brown 1996: 310). Also, some Islamic terms are given Western interpretations that may not correspond to the Muslim conceptions of them (e.g., jihad, mecca)<sup>40</sup>.

To all of the above problems one can add the culturally-produced errors of English. If the Muslim appropriation of English is relatively recent and marked by a past colonial encounter, the English language’s encounter with Islam is old and marked by a history of orientalism and cultural prejudice. A good example of such cultural prejudice invested in language would be the notion of “Mohammedanism,”<sup>41</sup> which implies that

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<sup>40</sup> Most Muslims would object to the translation of jihad as holy war. Similarly, Muslims would also prefer the use of word mecca/Mecca only in religious context.

<sup>41</sup> Muslims initially used the labels and titles present in the mainstream culture. For example, the first Muslim mosque in Michigan (1921) was advertised as the “Mohammedan Hall”. In other instances, mosques would be called Moorish or Moslem ‘temples’. They gradually changed such titles and replaced them with “Islamic center” or *masjid*, the Arabic word for mosque. The evolution of names and titles

Muslims worship Muhammad, a false prophet claiming to be a god. Faruqi rightly points to the “Maumet” entry in *Webster’s International Dictionary* (Faruqi 1986: 10).

Part of the prescriptive project of Faruqi’s Islamic English assigns Muslims the task of decolonizing English. Decolonization of the English vocabulary about Islam and codification of the Islamic vocabulary that is increasingly used in English are two avenues for the articulation of an Islamic English.<sup>42</sup>

### **Islamic English or Muslim English?**

#### *How Much Islamization is Too Much?*

In February 3, 2003, a young Australian Muslim, Irfan Yusuf, published a short essay criticizing Ismail Faruqi’s idea of Islamic English. Published on a popular American Muslim website, *MuslimWakeUp.com*, the essay was entitled “The Islaam of Double Vowels” (Yusuf 2003). MuslimWakeUp is a website that caters to young professional Muslims who are both second and third generation and also very critical of mainstream Muslim conservatism. The website provides a forum for discussion in addition to a cornucopia of content, ranging from critical essays to satire and poetry. Revealing a gap between Faruqi’s vision and the perception of new generations of Muslims in English speaking countries, the essay starts with a teasing question:

Do we all remember that really cool Palestinian American academic, the late Dr. Ismail Faruqi? And what about his cool wife, Lanya? One wrote on Islamic thought, the other on Islamic art. A whole generation of young Muslims in North America was apparently brought up on that stuff. Well, that’s what we in

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provides an interesting illustration of the shift from the labels applied by someone else to one’s own designation.

<sup>42</sup> Credit for the successful codification of some Islamic vocabulary should go to *the Nation of Islam* (led by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X) and its successor, the *American Muslim Mission* (led by Warith Deen Muhammad). They successfully corrected the spelling and hence pronunciation of some major terms in the media. Old British uses such as Moslem and Koran were replaced by Muslim and the Qur’an. The latter are increasingly becoming the norm even while the former remain in use.



Australia think. You see, we are really not quite sure. The Faruqis lived in an era before the Internet became popular and before we could chat with bruzzerrz and sistarrz across the globe. So in presuming the extent of Dr. Faruqi's influence, we relied on the inside jackets and back covers of his books.

Anyway, Dr Faruqi and his "Islamisation of Knowledge" project was quite grand although it did at times enter the realms of the absurd. Take for instance, his book, *Towards Islamic English*. What on earth is Islamic English? Is it just saying "masha-Allah" and "insh'Allah" every second word? Do we draw a little star after every capital "C" so that it looks like part of the Pakistani or Turkish flag? Then of course there is the Islam (or is it "Islaam") of double vowels... (Yusuf 2003).

The essay is a partly-satirical rejection of Faruqi's insistence on infusing Islamic concepts and forms into the English language. "The Islaam of Double Vowels" is symptomatic of the growing gap between Muslims born into English language environments and Faruqi's (and his generation's) call for an Islamic English. Unlike their immigrant parents or grandparents, the new Australian- or American-born generations of Muslims do not treat the English language as something alien to Islam or incapable of fully expressing it.

The same tension can be traced in another instance where Islamic English is reconceptualized as Muslim English. In 2006, a popular Muslim online multimedia store and website, *SoundVision.com*<sup>43</sup> published an article that asked the same question Ismail Faruqi asked two decades ago: "Can there be Muslim English?" (Mujahid 2006).

Intended as a guide to common Arabic usage in the English language, the article starts with the assumption that "in the absence of simple basic common rules, Muslim English is becoming difficult to read for *new Muslims, young Muslims* and *non Muslims*" [emphasis mine].

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<sup>43</sup> SoundVision's mission statement notes that "the attitudes and behavior of men and women today are shaped and molded by the media whose ideals and images, by and large, are non-Islamic. SoundVision aims to produce content with Islamic ideals and images for all current and future media. SoundVision would like to lead the *Ummah* in the field of communication, *Insha Allah*."

Unlike Faruqi's programmatic and relatively purist "Islamic English," Abdul Malik Mujahid's article seeks to contribute to the standardization of "Muslim English."

And while Faruqi asks for more Arabic in English, Mujahid asks for less.

If it is meant for a general audience, we suggest a minimum use of the basic Islamic terms in English. Loading a writing or a speech with Arabic terms may impress a reader or listener, but is certain to fail to communicate with a vast majority of Muslims (90%) who are not Arabs, are young Muslims, new Muslims, or non Muslims. If communication is the purpose, don't create problems for your audience.

SoundVision's guide to Muslim English makes a series of suggestions for both transliteration and translation of Islamic (Arabic) words and concepts. But it is minimalistic, asking that English not be burdened with unnecessary Arabic words.

A general rule of thumb is that if it is not in the English dictionary, don't use it. If it is not an Islamic term, just an Arabic word, don't use it. It is good that we import Islamic terms from Arabic into English instead of through other languages. Therefore, Muslim is better than Musalman or Musselman... *Salat* is far better than *namaz*. If an Arabic term or its equivalent English word has become dominant in usage, let's keep using it for a while although it may not be very accurate representation of Arabic sounds or term. You cannot transform English into Arabgish or Engbic, can you?

Inviting his audience to a "pronunciation jihad" in English, Mujahid provides the formula: "Simpler is better."

Quran is simpler than Qur'an, al-Qur'an, or al-Qur'aan while we are still struggling to stop the usage of Koran which does not seem to be ill motivated either. Usage of Islam is more dominant than Islaam or al-Islam or alIslaam, or al Islam. So let's be happy with it. Dawa is simpler and better than Da'wa, Da'wah, or Dakwah. Writing Allah or God has been a difficult issue for many. Some translations of the Quran use God others use Allah. Instead of taking a position on this issue we suggest use it interchangeably so that language becomes used to it instead of differentiating between the two names.

As a guide for the use of Islamic words for media purposes, the “Muslim English” approach differs strikingly from Faruqi’s Islamic English. Since the rules suggested by SoundVison “are based more on common sense than any deductive logic or structure imposed by English or Arabic language. This is an effort to develop standards in usage of Arabic words in journalistic English for the layperson” (Mujahid 2006).

Although the SoundVision piece was not written in response to Faruqi’s project, the contrast between the two approaches allows us to make a useful distinction between Islamic English and Muslim English. Islamic English treats the linguistic *nomos* of the English language as a hindrance to the proper presentation of Islam. The idea that English cannot fully express the Islamic conception of the world is certainly open to debate. Nevertheless, it leads to a defensive position. If the format of English is oppressive and restrictive towards Islamic ontology, then a structural adjustment is needed. Islamic English is an attempt to “bend” English so as to “protect” Islamic ontology. Muslim English, however, approaches English as having a format conducive to the expression of Islam. Not driven by the fear of losing Islam in translation, Muslim English does not demand any surgical intervention into the language. Instead, it seeks to make Islamic ontological categories communicable without placing an additional burden on the structure of the language. In that sense, there are two alternative views or rather two stages of linguistic sedimentation.

#### *From Diasporic “Islamic English” to Post-Diasporic “Muslim English”*

A closer look at the intellectual approach of Ismail Faruqi and the practical approach of A. Malik Mujahid reveals several important differences between the two.

First of all, Faruqi's articulation of Islamic English is philosophical, whereas SoundVision's is commercial. Therefore, while Faruqi asks for a structural negotiation with the English language, the SoundVision author tends to accept the structure and seeks ways, to use Faruqi's word, to "fit" in. Faruqi's emphasis on and search for authenticity is indicative of the postcolonial character of his project. SoundVision's orientation, on the other hand, is both post-diasporic and American. It replaces authenticity with efficiency as its primary concern. Finally, the greatest difference between the two articulations of a Muslim-friendly English language lies in the nature of their audiences; while Faruqi's primary audience were Muslim students whose experience was characterized by displacement and immigration, the primary audience of SoundVision is second and third generation Muslims whose experience is characterized by cultural settlement and integration with the larger society. While Faruqi's audience had an overseas (i.e. immigrant) habitus in an American habitat, SoundVision's audience has an American habitus in an American habitat.

### **An English Speaking *Ummah***

Most American Muslim communities are still somewhere on the path between Faruqi and SoundVision, that is, between Islamic and Muslim English. The English language of Islam is in the process of crystallization and this process is paralleled by the formation of a community imagined through English. The fact that Arabic is the sacred language in Islam often prevents us from seeing the crucial role played by English in the formation of American Muslimness.

Today, Islam in America has two universal languages: Arabic and English. Arabic is the language of ritual and symbolizes ritualistic unity, whereas English is the language of communication and symbolizes communal unity. In an interesting twist, in America the Muslim idea of *ummah* (community) is possible only through one language— and that language is not Arabic but English. Muslims coming from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds connect with each other through English. English serves many functions for Muslims in American society. It is an instrument of legitimation, a means of connection with other Muslims (both locally and globally), a path to integration with the larger (American) society, and a vehicle for reaching out to non-Muslims (in *dawah*).

#### *Language Dynamics of Mosques*

As mosque communities lose their original immigrant insularity and become more and more ethnically diverse, they face the challenge of finding clerics who can function in two languages: Arabic and English. The early imams could survive with Arabic and the ethnic language of their congregation. (In the case of Arab immigrants that would be Arabic. But it could be Urdu or Albanian for other communities.) The need for competence in English emerged only with the coming of the second generation, and has intensified with the third. It comes as no surprise that early imams, like Imam Mohammad Chirri of *Islamic Center of America* and Imam Vehbi Ismail of *Albanian Islamic Center*, found it necessary to write basic catechism pamphlets and books in English for their growing American congregations. As communities settled and grew in numbers, they lost their homogeneity through contact with other Muslims and through the influence of mainstream culture on the younger generation. The pressure toward more

use of English was further intensified with the conversion of people whose first and often only language was English.

Most of the mosques try to strike a balance between their two-- and in many cases, three or more-- languages. Even though Arabic remains a constant as the language of ritual, out of convenience, most immigrants use their ethnic languages (Urdu, Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, etc.) in daily communication. However, the *lingua franca* among Muslims of various backgrounds is English. Exclusive reliance on English alienates the first generation immigrants, while its absence alienates both new generations whose primary language is English and Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds. The extreme diversity of the Muslim community in the United States therefore encourages two phenomena, greater emphasis on the concept of *ummah* (Muslim community) as a unifying identity, and the rise of English as the language of communication for that *ummah*.

Today almost all mosques deliver most of their Friday sermons in English, though the proportion of English language use varies from imam to imam and congregation to congregation. English language competence is becoming more central to recruiting and hiring imams. As 9/11 and other factors created the need for outreach and interfaith activism, the language imperative for imams and community leaders has intensified. Lectures and extracurricular activities outside regular prayers have also contributed to the growing need for English language competence.

*English and the Postcolonial Network*

The disproportionate representation of, for example, South African imams and intellectuals in the United States illustrates the crucial role that English plays in gaining access to global markets of Islamic clerical and intellectual knowledge production. As American congregations began to seek imams who would combine strong Islamic credentials with proficiency in English, they naturally turned to the once-colonized hinterlands of Islam. In Metro Detroit alone, three of the most prominent local scholars are examples of this trend: Imam Achmat Salie of Oakland County, the former imam of Islamic Association of Greater Detroit (IAGD), and Muneer Fareed, current secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) are both from South Africa and Imam Ali Suleyman Ali of the Canton mosque is originally from Ghana. Prominent Muslim academics in the United States like Farid Esack and Ebrahim Moosa are also both from South Africa. What makes possible the disproportionate representation in America of South African Muslims—who are a tiny minority in their own country—is the English language.

The same dynamics also explain the origins of key figures involved in the polemics with Christianity. A case in point is the popularity of Ahmed Deedat's books and audio-videos. Deedat, who died recently, was a Muslim scholar from South Africa who was well known for his knowledge of Christian scripture and his debates with Christian clerics. Most American Muslim bookstores still carry Deedat's books.

#### *Avenues of Authenticity: English and Islamic Knowledge*

One can even discuss the presence of a politics of English in the American Muslim community, in the sense that mastery of English can empower one group over

another or one leader over others. Religious competence being equal, an imam who speaks English is often preferred. Communities may even sacrifice a degree of religious competence in exchange for language skills (i.e., employing an American-born imam rather than someone from overseas who has greater knowledge of Islam). Therefore, imams attempt to acquire competence in English and American culture. A young Muslim student recently told me that Shaikh Yaqoubi of the Zaytuna Institute is memorizing Shakespeare in order to better communicate Islam.

The rise of the Zaytuna Institute demonstrates how those with simultaneous access to local American culture and overseas Islamic knowledge enjoy the highest popularity and prestige, especially among young Muslims. Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, both American converts and Islamic scholars associated with the Zaytuna Institute in California, are increasingly becoming popular among new generation American Muslims. In a *New York Times* story about the Institute, a 19-year-old student from New York states that “Sheik Hamza Yusuf and Imam Zaid Shakir have grown up here after having studied abroad, you can really connect with them. The scholars who come from abroad,” he adds, “they can’t connect with the people. They are ignorant of the life here.” (Laurie Goodstein, “U.S. Muslim Clerics Seek a Modern Middle Ground,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2006). The search for a Muslim English has also given rise to what Hermansen calls “Islam-speak:” “peppering one’s conversation or presentation with pious formulae is a common feature of Muslim performance. It is a demarcator of Muslim discourse and a means of Islamizing English” (Hermansen 2004: 393).

*The African-American Muslim Voice*



In the short run, the desire for native-born scholars has tended to privilege African-American imams (cf. the popularity of Imam Siraj Wahhaj on the MSA speaking circuit), suggesting an ever-closer convergence between black and immigrant language practices. At the same time, however, the different dynamics of the black Muslim community are leading them to choose a distinct path through the pragmatics of Islamic and Muslim English.

Unlike immigrant Muslims, African-American Muslims have a fairly comfortable relationship with Christianity.<sup>44</sup> When I attended Friday services at the Detroit Muslim Center or Masjid Wali Muhammad, which was *Temple Number One* of the former Nation of Islam, I observed that the style and frame of reference of sermons were very different from those of the immigrant mosques. The speakers assumed their listeners to be intimately familiar with both the phrasing and stories of the King James Bible. They often supplemented Muslim ethical exhortations with Biblical aphorisms and illustrated their points with reference to stories not present in the Qur'an (David and Goliath, for instance). The speakers differed little in cadence and manner from the typical AME or Baptist preacher. And their audience received them in a fitting manner, with loud "A-a-men"s and "You tell it, Brother!"s resounding from all parts of the mosque (including the women's section).

### *Translations of the Qur'an*

Although it is most actively felt in African-American mosques today, it is worth remembering that Biblical language is—if only indirectly—a part of the inheritance of all English-speaking Muslims.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on African American Muslims and their relationship to Christianity, see Chapter 6.

The English translations of the Qur'an most popular with Muslims in America today were all produced by either colonial Muslims in diaspora (e.g., Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a British Indian Muslim)<sup>45</sup> or Western converts to Islam (e.g. Muhammad Asad, an Austrian Jew)<sup>46</sup>. These translators shaped their diction in imitation of (or, rarely, in reaction against) King James, the gold standard of elevated, "sacred" style in English. Because of the unavailability of *tafsir* (interpretation) of the Qur'an in English, the translations included somewhat detailed footnotes and translator's notes, where verses were sometimes explained through the invocation of Biblical passages. For example, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's introductory note regarding the first chapter in the Qur'an starts in the following manner:

*Al-Fatihah*, "The Opening," or *Fatihatu'l-Kitab*, "The Opening of the Scripture" or *Ummu'l-Qur'an*, "The Essence of the Qur'an," as it is variously named, has been called the Lord's Prayer of the Muslims (Pickthall 1938: 1).

The analogy between *Al-Fatihah* and the Lord's Prayer shows how translation is always a cultural reinterpretation. Similarly, in the notes to Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an, there are references to Shakespeare and Milton. The initial awareness and style of translation that emerged in colonial and early minority Muslim contexts is arguably still a part of the texture of the language of Islam in English. This awareness of and constant dialogue with Biblical culture is a result of being a minority in a Christian majority society. It also demonstrates that Muslims have chosen a Christian interlocutor. Pickthall's introduction illustrates this point when he states,

The aim of this work is to present to English readers what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the Qur'an and the nature of that Book, in not unworthy language and concisely, with a view to the requirements of English

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<sup>45</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an* (1934)

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1930).

Muslims. It may be reasonably claimed that no Holy Scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelieves its inspiration and its message; and this is the first English translation of the Qur'an by an Englishman who is a Muslim. (Pickthall 1938: iii)

If English translations of the Qur'an are inextricably linked both to Christianity and to the mind of the colonizer, immigrant and African-American Muslims deal with this troublesome history in very different ways. For immigrant Muslims, the Christian interlocutor is an *other*, even a rival. For African-Americans and converts, the Christian interlocutor is more often a family member, or even their own past selves.

#### *Another Mode of Authenticity*

Perhaps because their personal histories are often bound up with Christianity, English speakers who adopt Islam have rather different attitudes towards the use of Arabic than do Muslims who adopt English. In other words, African American Muslim English is often different from immigrant Muslim English. While African-Americans prefer Arabic words such as “al-Islam” (instead of Islam) and “deen” (instead of religion) as a way of authenticating themselves as Muslims, immigrants prefer English words such as “God” in order to authenticate their Americanness.

This chapter has traced a circle from the authenticity anxieties of Muslims in general protecting themselves from corruption via language to the (dueling) new authenticities of English-seeking immigrant scholars and English-fleeing American converts.

## Conclusion

The Muslim perception of the English language has changed over time from a defensive suspicion to an appropriative embrace. As Muslims found themselves deeper in and closer to the English language sphere, they developed visions and strategies to detach the language from its Christian or colonial baggage and articulate English as a Muslim language. The perceived tension between the authentic Islamic conception of the world and the linguistic *nomos* of English is also a reflection of the location of Muslims like Faruqi who developed the idea of Islamic English. In other words, Muslim theories about the English language are a function of their locations vis-à-vis the language. The misfit between the ontology of Islam as it was understood by Faruqi and the structure of English illustrated the temporal nature of the language/culture nexus. Displacement of Muslims through immigration put their Islamic habitus at odds with their new linguistic habitat. The symbolic violence that the new habitat exercised on the old habitus found its expression in linguistic anomie— or appeared, as it did to Faruqi, as chaos and injustice. It was this assumption that led Faruqi to employ words redolent of symbolic violence when he described the experience of Islam’s translation into English. He countered its “mutilation,” “reduction” and “ruin” with the suggestion of “bending” the English language to accommodate Islam.

The cultural settlement of Islam in the linguistic habitat of American society is an ongoing process. It produces a tension between Muslim life and American forms. The process requires Muslim arbiters of style to transform the multiplicity of linguistic practices that now characterize Islamic English into a commonly-agreed set of rules. Once Muslim English becomes standardized, the anxieties and histories associated with

its development will sink beneath the waves of common sense. The triumph of a new linguistic nomos will establish the order and orientation currently lacking in the relationship between Muslims and English in America.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Homeland Insecurity: How Immigrant Muslims Naturalize America in Islam**

There has always been some kind of *nomos* of the earth. In all ages of mankind, the earth has been appropriated, divided and cultivated. But before the age of the great discoveries, before the 16<sup>th</sup> century of our system of dating, men had no global concept of the planet on which they lived... Every powerful people considered themselves to be the center of the earth and their dominion to be the domicile of freedom, beyond which war, barbarism, and chaos ruled.

--Carl Schmitt (2003: 351)

#### **Introduction**

Muslims who become immigrants in the United States face a challenge unusual in the Muslim world: living as a minority in a non-Muslim society. This experience, which we in contemporary multicultural society take for granted, is a new situation for the majority of Muslim immigrants. It is not that Muslims never had minorities among themselves. On the contrary, there have always been non-Muslim minorities living in lands dominated by Muslims. But the reverse has not always been true, especially in the case of Muslims residing in Western societies. Muslim reluctance to settle permanently, as well as a lack of tolerance towards Islam in the Western world, have both contributed to this historical outcome. Muslim presence in and exposure to non-Muslim environments were historically “temporary” and justified within the legal framework of “necessity” (i.e., due to exception and emergency). The rise of Muslim minorities in contemporary

European and American societies is in many ways a new situation for both the Muslims and the West and therefore poses a challenge to Islamic law and Muslim imagination as well as to the West. The emergence of “permanent” Muslim minorities has significant religious implications. Is it religiously permissible to live in a non-Muslim society? What should be the nature of one’s relationship to such a social environment? These are questions Muslims interested in religiously justifying their new environment frequently ask themselves. The answers they find, to employ the much-debated Muslim juridical terms, range from America as an abode of war/disbelief (*Dar al harb*) to America as an abode of Islam/peace (*Dar al Islam*). The evolution of the Muslim perception of “America as homeland” is an important cultural dimension of citizenship and constitutes an understudied aspect of Muslim cultural settlement in the United States. How do immigrant Muslims overcome their initial sense of “homeland insecurity” and feel at home as Muslims in America?

This chapter is a phenomenological account of Muslim constructions of America as homeland. It starts by articulating the concept of home and what it means to feel at home. It continues with a brief inventory of the cultural idioms or topoi with which early Muslim immigrants and Muslims in their initial immigration made sense of their presence in America. This diasporic moment and vocabulary changed over time as exposure and interaction led to a more nuanced understanding. In addition to these cultural idioms, there are crucial juridical tools by which Muslims religiously interpret America and produce an articulation of America as “home.” Therefore, the fundamental question that this chapter answers is how Muslims naturalize the United States in Islam. I aim to capture the dynamics of the transition from being “in” America to being “of” America.

## **Reality and Its *Anomies***

One difference between an immigrant and a citizen is that for the citizen home/homeland are the same, while for the immigrant they are not. The correspondence between home/homeland is achieved through the extension of home into homeland. For continuity between home and homeland, which is a condition of feeling at home, requires the projection of what is private and subjective (i.e., home, Muslim, communal) into what is public and intersubjective (i.e., city, American, national). Before engaging in a discussion of the transformation of Muslim discourses on America, we need to establish some theoretical connections between feeling-at-home and homeland and between displacement and the sense of anomie.

A defining characteristic of home is that it is a place where the relationship between the subject and space take the form of a feeling: feeling-at-home or being-in-the-world. A place is home only when inhabited.<sup>47</sup> It is inhabitation that turns “any” place into home. Hence, there is nothing essentialist about home. When inhabitation generates the feeling of “feeling-at-home” we can say that a place has become home. What is crucial for the sense of home is the experience of dwelling (Heidegger 1971:143). This

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<sup>47</sup> Home is a special kind of space: it is carved out of a general space and marked as exclusive; it is the surface upon which subjective world-construction takes place. Our selves are anchored in the things around us. It is because of the intensity of this anchoredness that we often say “there’s no place like home.” Home is the place where the subjective (consciousness) pours itself out in things (Levinas 1969: 153). Unlike the street (or city square) which is a public space presumably accessible to all citizens, home is not open to all. It is a topographically opaque spot on the surface of public space. On closer inspection, of course, we notice that the city square is not open to everyone, either. It is open only to citizens (similar to Habermasian public autonomy (Habermas 1996: 34) and the boundaries of nation). Yet it remains an intersubjective realm. By contrast, home is a subjective realm, an exclusive space corresponding to the private autonomy of the individual in liberal political philosophy (Arendt 1998). The private and public spheres are respectively subjective and intersubjective.



subjective recognition of a place as home is a temporal process. The subject appropriates a given space as home only after she projects into that space her subjective being, that is, when she dwells.<sup>48</sup> This projection is also a construction of the subjective world which becomes the ground for the production of the intersubjective world (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 20). In short, “with the dwelling the latent birth of the world is produced” (Levinas 1969: 157).

Simmel provided an early sociological account of the tension or lack of equilibrium between subjective and objective cultures (Simmel 1971, Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 55-75). His discussion of the crisis in culture is in many ways a pioneering study on the topic of homelessness in the general sense of the “homeless mind” of modernity (Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974). Simmel argued that the increasing division of labor and proliferation of cultural products (objective culture) placed a disproportionate strain on the subject, who could no longer have a true comprehension of her cultural environment. This process of alienation from the environment, or in Simmel’s own terms, the loss of equilibrium between subjective culture and objective culture, was a tragic consequence of modernity.

Arendt also treated the idea of home as a staging ground for entry into the intersubjective realm (Arendt 1998: 207) where different subjects meet and where the encounter of different subjects produces objects (natural or social). Thus we feel at home where everything is subjective. That is, all objects are subjectivized (e.g., the IKEA desk that is now my late-night refuge) and subjective elements objectivized (e.g., the arrangement of things on my desk). The Simmelian idea of cultural crisis refers to the collapse of the flow between the subjective and the objective cultures.

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In their treatise on the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann provide a fascinating discussion of the way common sense (i.e., reality, the world as we know it) is produced and maintained (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Any given society is an arena of reality construction where individual members participate in the production of objective reality. This reality is sustained as long as the intersubjective realm of lifeworld that underpins it remains available. Thus, any common sense or reality is precarious because

All societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 103).

Here, there are several themes that need to be made explicit. First, the reality that each society produces is constructed against a background of chaos. That is, it is produced through the introduction of *nomos* into a realm that is otherwise chaotic. *Nomos* (rule, law, regularity, sense) translates chaos into order and nature into culture. The idea of homeland is one such cultural construction produced on the surface of bare geography. Second, the reality to which *nomos* gives rise is historical, contingent and fragile. Therefore, anomie, which is the loss of *nomos*, has a terrorizing effect, causing anxiety and insecurity. This includes the anxiety one feels in prolonged distance from home, or the insecurity of an unfamiliar abode. That is also why things and places unfamiliar or mentally inaccessible are associated with the uncanny. Referring to the fear of the unfamiliar, Freud links the uncanny to the unhomely and homeless (Freud 2003).

Third, the anxiety and insecurity, normally repressed and swept under the carpet by intersubjective dwelling and everyday language, burst in when either the protective shield is removed (internal collapse) or those protected within it move outside it. Hence, anomic terror can happen either temporally (crisis) or spatially (finding oneself outside

the coverage area of the shield). In other words, anomie, chaos, and bare nature all manifest themselves in marginal or *liminal* situations (Turner 1969: 95). That is to say, they manifest themselves either under the shield or beyond its limits. Outside the shield—or to use Berger’s own term, outside the “canopy” (Berger 1969)—all the distinctions dissolve. In the words of a political philosopher, “man erects around himself an artificial netting which conceals from him the abyss” (Strauss 1989: 36). The structure expires and anti-structure (Turner 1969) begins. The margins reveal the historicity of the structure. At the edges and on the frontiers, the nomothetic format (i.e., constructed reality) ends and the unformatted surface (chaos) appears, or to put it more precisely, what is beyond appears as chaotic. The relationship between *nomos* and chaos/anomie is crucial for a proper understanding of the experience of people who are displaced. The Durkheimian discussion of anomic suicide is directly linked to such displacement (Durkheim 1951: 241). Displacement in this sense might entail encounter with a radically different culture and/or language.

Immigration is one such displacement.<sup>49</sup> For immigrants, the most obvious challenge to their sense of reality is the requirement to speak another language, since language is the depository of common sense *par excellence*. But there are other challenges, especially if their religion is different and/or has a history of conflict with the religion of the host culture. In the next section, I trace the experience of Muslim immigrants who either find themselves at the frontiers or outside of the juridical concept of Muslim homeland (*dar al Islam*).

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<sup>49</sup> An extreme case would be the situation of individuals kidnapped into slavery, which results in social death (Patterson 2005).

## Muslims Outside the Islamic Canopy?

Medieval Muslim jurists developed a binary opposition to distinguish the legal status of Muslim-controlled lands from the rest of the world. They designated as *dar al Islam* (abode of Islam, abode of peace) the lands where Islam is dominant or has been naturalized as mainstream culture. By that classification, all other places fell under the category of *dar al harb* (abode of war, abode of chaos) or *dar al kufr* (abode of disbelief). In this conception, *dar al Islam* becomes a spatial or geographic projection of the Islamic sacred canopy. Scholars have different opinions as to whether the canopy is held up by an Islamic political rule or by an Islamic mainstream culture even when the ruler is not necessarily Islamic (Al-Alwani 2003: 28, Ramadan 2002: 166). What is decisive in either case is whether a certain land has been subject to Islamic *nomos* and thus become conducive to an unrestricted, free practice of Islam. In short, *dar al Islam* describes a legal order (and not necessarily a political one<sup>50</sup>) where geography is codified through the imaginary inscription of Islamic law. The remainder of that geography is mentally “nihilated” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 114) in order to create the sharp contrast that preserves “mental hygiene”(Zerubavel 1991: 37, Berger and Luckmann 1966: 156). This spiritual appropriation of land finds still another abstract expression in the juridical order of things. Identification of *qibla*, the direction of Mecca, is yet another form of religious appropriation of land, that is, introduction of *nomos*.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Islamic law is not necessarily state law. It is produced by jurists who are often outside the control of the state.

<sup>51</sup> The Jewish religious idea of *eruv* stands between the Muslim idea of *qibla* and the notion of *dar al Islam*. An *eruv* is a symbolically appropriated place where space is codified and made –literally- navigable during the Sabbath. The single most important social function of the *eruv* is the creation of a communal domain through a religious marking of the public sphere. The *eruv* sets aside a portion of the public sphere and symbolically transforms it into a communal sphere (Rosen Zvi 2004, Cooper 1998).

As a juridical sphere, *dar al Islam* refers to the pacified, codified space enclosed within the canopy. Muslims living within *dar al Islam* are inhabitants of a familiar abode and members of a bounded community. This sphere that is under public law and familiar for jurisprudential purposes is surrounded by its constitutive other, *dar al harb*. What remains outside, therefore, becomes an extrajudicial, agonistic sphere. In that sense, *dar al harb* is similar to the Greek conception of “barbarian lands.” Muslims venture into this unfamiliar abode, the uncanny, only at their spiritual peril.

Concerned with the protection of Islamic identity, the classical Muslim jurists saw no reason why Muslims should move to *dar al harb* permanently. They strongly discouraged people from leaving the abode of Islam unless their departure was due to *darura* (necessity)<sup>52</sup>. This extrajudicial sphere was thus incorporated into the legal canopy through the state of emergency; stay in that sphere fell under the paradigm of *exception*.

### *The Significance of Darura*

*Darura* or necessity occupies a special place in all legal traditions because it is the foundation of exception (Agamben 2005: 24). As a limit concept it is the borderline between juridical order and bare life, between facticity and norms (Habermas 1996). Where public law (in this case, Islam) ends, political fact (the agonistic sphere) begins. Therefore, law melts under the conditions of necessity, as implied by the ancient maxim

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<sup>52</sup> American Muslim scholar Nuh Ha Mim Keller describes *darura* as vital interest: “How is it possible that the ruling of Allah could vary from place to place? One scholarly answer is found in the Islamic legal concept of *darura* or “vital interest” that sometimes affects the *shari’a* rulings otherwise normally in force. Although the fundamental basis of Islamic law is that it is valid for all times and places, Allah Most High, in His divine wisdom, stipulates in Surat al-Hajj that “*He has not placed any hardship upon you in religion*” (Qur’an 22:78) (Keller 1995).

*necessitas legem non habet* [necessity has no law] (Agamben 2005: 1). For the necessity has the power to render the illicit (*haram*) licit (*halal*).<sup>53</sup> But this is not generalizable: necessity justifies only specific, individual cases of transgression through exception.<sup>54</sup>

The movement of Muslims from *dar al Islam* to *dar al harb* is a movement from inside legal order to outside of it, from law to exception. According to Carl Schmitt, law has two fundamental elements: norm and decision (Schmitt 1976: 10). In the state of exception, that is in *dar al harb*, the decision remains while the norm recedes. Put differently, the law loses its objective normalizing power and taken-for-granted character. More specifically, it loses its power of “convention,” which is what makes a law law. The new environment does not lend itself to the applicability of the norm developed inside the canopy and demands (a new) decision, an act of construction. At that very moment the agency attributed to the law through reification falls back into the hands of the lawmaker.

The movement from rule (norm) to exception (decision) shifts our attention from the law itself to the lawmaker(s). What had been given, now becomes an explicit object of human construction. It is a shift from an already naturalized, habitualized reality to a reality that is witnessed at the moment of its construction by human subjects. This de-routinization also corresponds to what Agamben calls “force-of-law without law” (Agamben 2005: 39).

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<sup>53</sup> An illustration of an everyday case of *darura*: if a Muslim is marooned on a desert island with nothing to eat but a ham sandwich, he or she may eat it.

<sup>54</sup> A Shia handbook that I obtained from the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, where it is used as a textbook for English-speaking youth and converts, addresses the issues of Muslim minorities in the West. It states that, “A believer is allowed to travel to non-Muslim countries provided that he is sure or feels confident that the journey would not have a negative impact on his faith. Similarly a believer is allowed to reside in non-Muslim countries provided that his residing there does not become a hurdle in the fulfillment of his or her religious obligations” (Al-Hakim 1999: 42).

Therefore, as will become evident later in this chapter, the analogies made by Muslims themselves to the time of the Prophet Muhammad are not in vain: there are very real similarities between the contemporary frontiers (margins) of Islam and its center, its beginning. The similarities are both temporal (*hijra*, the early migration of Muslims and the first establishment of Islam)<sup>55</sup> and spatial (choosing *qibla* and operating on a land that is not yet *dar al Islam*).<sup>56</sup> Therefore, stepping outside the canopy is a return to the pre-history of the canopy. At the frontiers, where *nomos* is absent, there is an originary indistinction (chaos, anomie). After all, necessity is the first and originary source of all law. It is this character of necessity and exception that explains the law and rule (Agamben 2005: 27, Schmitt 1976: 15). In that sense, it reveals the historicity and contingency of the law. At the spatial margins of Islam, Muslims have to reenact what those who codified Islam in the Muslim lands did many centuries ago. As Michel de Certeau has observed, “other lands restore to us what our own culture has seen fit to exclude from its own discourse” (de Certeau 1988: 14).

There are two possibilities for those who find themselves outside the canopy: they can either extend the canopy to cover their spot or engage in the construction of a new one. It will become clear in the case of Muslims that choosing the first seems to lead to the second, as far as the distinction between *dar al Islam* and *dar al harb* is concerned.

Extending the canopy under the paradigm of exception (*darura*) may be done for individual necessities, but if there is a large number of people residing not temporarily

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<sup>55</sup> “During the early days of Islam, a number of Muslims took refuge in the non-Muslim land of Abyssinia in order to preserve their faith. This episode bears particular significance [to the situation of Muslim minorities today] because it occurred at a time when the foundations of Islamic law and *fiqh* [jurisprudence] were still being established” (Al-Alwani 2003: 30-1).

<sup>56</sup> A previous chapter on *qibla*, the Muslim direction to Mecca, also reveals the starting point of the canopy and its end point. Perhaps nowhere else do we have mosques with two *qiblas* but in Medina and Detroit.

but permanently in what early jurists designated as *dar al harb*, can they still rely on *darura* as a paradigm?

The paradigm of *darura* enabled Muslims to make brief forays into *dar al harb*. Now that Muslims have permanently settled in what used to be seen as *dar al harb*, they have to transform necessity into law—bare life into canopy—and cultivate *nomos* on an anomic space. As the examples I give later will clarify, the movement from canopy to anomie is always temporary: it inevitably ends with arrival at a new canopy. Canopy construction, which is the construction of new reality, is similar to dwelling and has a temporal character. In plain terms, a guest who stays for too long is no longer a guest but a lodger. Whether temporal or spatial, the anomic liminality of *darura* expires either with a return to the canopy or the emergence of a new one.

So far, in my discussion of *darura*, the zone of exception, I have touched upon the relationship between *darura* and law and its manifestations in time and space. Before concluding this section, I shall briefly explain the reason why it came to prominence and the type of ethos *darura* engenders.

As a space of unenforceability of law or dispensation from the application of law, *darura* implies the impossibility of experiencing a given place as a fully justified home. Thus it works as a temporary protective juridical shield (like a raincoat) for limited exposure to *dar al harb*. *Darura* gained jurisprudential prominence in modern times as a result of the processes that caused (dis)placement of Muslims into non-Muslim lands. These processes include colonialism in the past and globalization and Muslim immigration in contemporary times.



A juridical term designating the condition of “crisis times” and “unhomely places,” *darura* has a particular ethos. This ethos is a “deficient mode of care” in the Heideggerian sense.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the ethics of *darura* is negative. It demands avoidance, minimal involvement and unsettlement. It thus corresponds to the condition and experience of sojourners who do not feel at home. In a more strict sense, this ethos is a diasporic ethos, where home/land is elsewhere and the heart is there. In the next section, I give a quick overview of some prominent topoi of Muslim diasporic culture. Each topos tells us a certain aspect of the experience of Muslim immigrants.

### Topoi of Muslim Diasporic Imagination

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<sup>57</sup> In *Being and Time*, a phenomenological critique of the Cartesian division of the world, Heidegger argues that modern rationalism assumes “a worldless subject” (Heidegger 1962: 144) and ignores the idea of *worldhood*. As human beings, we are not self-contained subjects but entities in an existential state of Being-in (Heidegger 1962: 84). Unlike objects, we are always oriented, we are in the world and we have a world. Our being in the world is quite different from a chair’s being in the room (Heidegger 1962: 81). Our residence in the world is made possible by our involvement with it. While our relationship to our environment is one of encounter, that of two objects is not. They are in that sense worldless. Our practical experience of being-in-the world is

such that [our] Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining... All these ways of Being-in have *concern* as their kind of Being... Leaving undone, neglecting, renouncing, taking a rest – these too are ways of concern; but these are all *deficient* modes, in which the possibilities of concern are kept to a ‘bare minimum’ (Heidegger 1962: 83).

In Heidegger’s later thought, the idea of being-in-the world evolves into the concept of “dwelling”. Once anchored, the subject can produce sustained interaction which leads to habitualization and the construction of the world (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Heidegger’s paragraph above makes clear that there is an intimate link between dwelling and ethics. For being-in-the-world or dwelling is understood in terms of *care*, involvement, the disposition that allows something to matter to us. Dwelling situates us in a world, not in the sense in which a chair is *in* a room, but rather in the sense in which someone is *in* a family or *in* love with someone else (Foltz 1995: 156). To put it in more familiar sociological terms, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is a simple inversion of Heidegger’s notion of dwelling. Dwelling is *us in the world* and habitus is *the world in us*. Thus as a term that captures both habit and ethos, habitus has dwelling as its history. Ethics develops through involvement with the environment. In that sense, there is a homology between the degrees of involvement and the nature of the ethics (or ideology) one has toward that environment. This will be further illustrated in the case of Muslims in America, where different degrees of involvement with American habitat is linked to different conceptions of America, ranging from the abode of war (*Dar al Harb*) to the abode of Islam (*Dar al Islam*).

Under the conditions of immigration, Muslims are displaced and disembedded from their original national environments. With immigration, they find themselves in a diasporic condition and interstitial location. For example, they are in American society but not (yet) *of* it. In order to explore how “Muslims in America” become “American Muslims” we need to first understand the consequences of displacement (immigration). Diasporic conditions trigger the release of some Muslim idioms from their otherwise marginal status and pull them to the surface of Muslim imagination. There are several prominent root-paradigms (Turner 1974: 67) that immigrant Muslims in America employ in making sense of their experience. These<sup>58</sup> include

- 1) *hijra* (the Prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina),
- 2) *ummah* (the universal Muslim community),
- 3) *dawah* (mission or propagation of Islam).
- 4) *jihad* (struggle, just war)

**HIJRA:** When the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were persecuted by the pagan Arab establishment of Mecca, he migrated to the nearby city of Medina in the year 622 CE. This event occupies such a central place in the Muslim imagination that it marks the starting point of the Muslim calendar (called the *Hijri* calendar). *Hijra* as a movement from Mecca to Medina represents a flight from chaos and oppression to a place of

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<sup>58</sup> A note on transliteration: Except for *jihad*, these terms have no standard transliterations. The reason why we have a standard transliteration for *jihad* is that, thanks to mass media and global terrorism, it has “settled” or sedimented in English language, albeit –Muslims believe– with some distortion. The same cannot be said for the other words, which can be spelled as *hijrah*, *umma*, *daawah* ( or *da’wah*) respectively. I am using the most common spellings. For an extended discussion of the fate of Islamic terms in relation to English, see the previous chapter, “The English Language and Islam: Genealogy of an Encounter.”

freedom that represents “the city” and “civilization” all at once.<sup>59</sup> The Prophet’s *hijra* thus constitutes the primary referent for the Muslim topos of *hijra*, migration. There is also a second event from the early days of Islam that contributes to the term’s symbolic meaning: the migration of Muslim refugees to Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) in 615 CE. Fearing that the Meccans’ hostility to his teachings might lead to the destruction of the nascent Muslim community, Muhammad sent a group of his disciples to seek refuge in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. The Meccans sent their own emissaries after them, asking that the king hand over these “insurgents” for punishment. The king instead questioned the refugees and discovered that their “subversive beliefs” differed little from his own Christian doctrine. He granted them amnesty, much to the disgruntlement of their pursuers. For Muslims this historical moment has become a touchstone of solidarity among *Ahl ul Kitab* (“Peoples of the Book,” i.e., followers of revealed scripture) and an emblem of the potential benefits of *hijra*.

*Hijra* is the primary idiom for Muslim immigrants who seek to frame their displacement—voluntary or not—in religious terms. It is not only the movement from one place to another or departure from one’s native land that makes these historical events relevant to contemporary migrants, but also the fact that the destinations were in both cases non-Muslim. Thus, *hijra* gained prominence among Muslims in the United States in a way that it provided a framework for their contemporary experience as immigrants (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 156). African-American Muslims even interpret their experience of slavery with reference to *hijra* and call *hijra* “The Greatest Migration” (Dannin 2002b: 59, Dannin 2002a). At the other end of the spectrum, a fringe radical

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<sup>59</sup> “Medina” is both the Arabic word for city and the root of “madaniyyah”, civilization.

group of Muslim immigrants based in Britain employs the self-identification *Al-Muhajiroun* (the emigrants) (Wiktorowicz 2005).

**UMMAH:** This concept designates the global community of Muslims (Mandaville 2003, Roy 2006). It also refers to the community of followers of any prophet. Some Muslim scholars link ummah to the concept to *shahada* (witnessing). “The greatness of the Islamic *ummah* is to be understood in the fact that it is a community of the middle path which must bear witness to the faith before all mankind” (Ramadan 2002: 158-9). A non-territorial concept, it allows Muslims to transcend their ethnic, linguistic and racial differences. In this imagined community, the members of which are tied to each other through exposure to the scripture and belief in one God, Muslims relate to each other across time and space. In the words of Benedict Anderson,

The strange physical juxtaposition of Malays, Persians, Indians, Berbers and Turks in Mecca is something incomprehensible without an idea of their community in some form. The Berber encountering the Malay before the *Kaaba* must, as it were, ask himself: ‘Why is this man doing what I am doing, uttering the same words that I am uttering, even though we cannot talk to one another?’ There is only one answer, once one has learnt it: ‘Because *we*...are Muslims’ (Anderson 1991: 54)

Muslim experience of America is often compared to the Muslim experience in Mecca because Muslims discover and feel the extreme diversity within the Muslim community both during their pilgrimage in Mecca and upon their arrival in America. It is at that moment that the concept of ummah gains prominence as a way of acknowledging and overcoming differences. The appeal of the concept of ummah comes from both the diversity of Muslim communities and their minority status vis-à-vis non-Muslim majority society and consequent need for solidarity.

**DAWAH:** *Dawah* means religious propagation, fulfillment of the religious obligation of representing the faith to outsiders. *Dawah* is the primary mode of relating to the outside of the Muslim community. *Dawah* is not limited to proselytizing, but can include charity work and participation in community service. As much as it targets outsiders, the more immediate motivation for its deployment in the foreign setting is the protection of the identity of insiders. As such it becomes a means of preserving religious identity and authenticity. It is an internally articulated means of engaging with the social environment. This sense of *dawah* is particularly relevant, for instance, for members of *Muslim Student Associations* on university campuses. A female undergraduate Muslim student at the University of Michigan once told me “I am Muslim. I wear my Muslim identity wherever I go. Every action I make publicly is an act of *dawah*. It is especially important to me because I know that everything I do, every stance that I take, reflects the entire Muslim *ummah* whether I want it or not.”

**JIHAD:** Of all the terms discussed here jihad looms largest in the American psyche. It is a contested concept for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Jihad refers to the constant structuration of the self and the world along the lines of Islam. It literally means struggle; it is the equivalent of self-discipline in Protestant cultures. The concept covers a variety of struggles, ranging from spiritual self-restraint to the collective execution of a just war. Recent uses of the term in ethnic nationalism and global terrorism have,

however, undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of non-Muslims.<sup>60</sup> Muslims themselves, in turn, employ the term increasingly reluctantly and uncomfortably. Yet they cannot do away with it, since it is part of Islam.

These key idioms have almost nothing to do with America *per se* as a destination for Muslim immigrants. They are root-paradigms that help Muslims make sense of their mobility/movement. The prominence the terms enjoy here is absent in Muslim majority lands. The exception would be places where colonialism has had a disproportionate impact and thus induced the feeling of being a minority, if we accept the definition of minority in terms of power and not numbers. For a very long time, the Muslim idea of *ummah* was quite marginal and would be felt explicitly only during the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. Globalization has altered this fact, but only recently. The power of *ummah*— or for that matter *hijra* and *dawah*— as primary topoi derives entirely from the diasporic moment. Therefore, although American Muslims use these topoi from early on, they are like a certificate that authorizes their departure but does not deal with their destination. These topoi are extensions of old homelands; they hardly touch America.<sup>61</sup>

### **A Theoretical Note**

We need to recognize that ideal types are and have to be grounded in experience.

This is similar to the recognition of the link between law and *darura* (necessity). The law

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<sup>60</sup> The author of *Jihad vs. McWorld*, for example, notes that “while for many Muslims it may signify only ardor in the name of a religion that can properly be regarded as universalizing, I borrow its meaning from those militants who make the slaughter of the ‘other’ a higher duty” (Barber 1996: 17).

<sup>61</sup> The list of Muslim immigrant topoi can be extended to include tropes like *ijtihad*, which refers to the mechanism for new codification and extension of the Islamic juridical canopy so that it includes new legal cases. Put more simply, *ijtihad* is the seeking of the reasonable ruling in the face of new situations.

is generated out of necessity and experience but when it becomes alienated from its ever changing source (*darura*, charisma) the law faces suspension. Its hardened layer has to be cracked or thinned so that the experience beneath can manifest itself.

What appears beneath the melting layer of law itself will soon become a new hardened layer. This means that just as anomie is temporally limited (transitional) and has to disappear, so does charisma, which is always *in statu nascendi*, nascent status (Weber 1946: 246, Shils 1972: 110). One person's charisma or anomie is someone else's rationality or reality. In other words, a foreign reality and rationality would always seem anomic and, depending on taste, charismatic. It is always a matter of time and location for the charisma and anomie to (routinize or fade away and thus) become rationality and reality, that is, to become a new canopy— whether you call it a “sacred canopy” (Berger 1969) or a secular “iron cage” (Weber 1946, Weber 1992: 181).

Therefore, we cannot rely on ideal types without bringing in the freshness of experience. We cannot conceptually understand habitus without understanding dwelling, rationality without charisma, or law/nomos without *darura*/anomie. It is this linking of binaries that allow us to lay bare the dynamics and origin of social constructions whether they are of home, homeland, the world or law and rationality. The question is how concrete experience, practices of lifeworld, face-to-face interactions and everyday experience in general congeal and theoretically sediment into ideal types, abstract images and commonsense. The understanding of experience and ideal types as mutually embedded in each other in an ever-expanding net that encapsulates us in the form of “the world,” allowing us to historicize the cultural objects of our analysis.

In *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Alfred Schutz provides a rich framework for the study of the relationship between experience and ideal types. According to Schutz we experience other people through their immediate physical presence, but our comprehension of them is based on ideal types. Think of meeting a person. After we part ways,

We make transition from direct to indirect social experience simply by following this spectrum of decreasing vividness. The first steps beyond the realm of immediacy are marked by a decrease in the number of perceptions within which I view him (Schutz 1967: 177).

As we move away from the experience and yet maintain a certain comprehension of the person by means of ideal types, he undergoes “a continuous series of ever increasing anonymization.” My friend Mr. Q whom I met yesterday may later become “a friend” and even further he can sink into the most general type of “one” or “someone.”

the other has now become anonymous; we may even say that he has been replaced by an ideal type that has been constructed out of previously given experiences of a certain course of action...The more anonymous my partner, the less direct and personal the relationship and the more conceptualized must my dealings with him be” (Schutz 1967: 219).

In this example, we have moved from the vividness of concrete experience to the anonymity of a general ideal type. Berger and Luckmann also provide a similar formulation of this relationship,

The social reality of everyday life is thus apprehended in a continuum of typifications, which are progressively anonymous as they are removed from the “here and now” of the face-to-face situation. At one pole of the continuum are those others with whom I frequently and intensively interact in face to face situations. At the other pole are highly anonymous abstractions which by their very nature can never be available in face-to-face interaction.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966)



Going back to the situation we deployed with Schutz, we can now think of a reverse procedure where experience comes back and transforms the ideal types we have formed about the person. When we meet again, “to this encounter with the other person, I bring a whole stock of previously constituted knowledge... My idea of him undergoes continuous revision as the concrete experience unfolds” (Schutz 1967: 169).

For the purposes of our subject, the changing Muslim discourses on America, we need to keep in mind the important distinction that Schutz makes between directly experienced social reality and a social reality lying beyond the horizon of direct experience. As the types we develop grow more and more abstract, we are getting further and further away from the actual subjective meaning complexes or contexts of individuals. Therefore, where Muslims are in relation to America will inevitably shape what they know and how much they can know about America.

### **Changing Muslim Discourses on America**

The immigrant Muslims’ encounter with America starts well before their arrival in America, because America has already entered the minds of Muslims as a phenomenon. The portrait that Muslims have of America is usually not based on direct experience but on powerful images or ideal types. With limited and oftentimes no direct experience, the image of America remains unchanged, unchallenged. Those images are not necessarily negative, but can range from positive, neutral to negative. Furthermore, not every Muslim who arrives with negative views of America ends up developing a positive one and vice versa. Nevertheless one thing is certain: in their own national cultures, Muslims have very little ground for knowing America and almost exclusively

rely on ideal types supplied by globalized American popular culture and the stereotypes of America. When the question is posed from a religious juridical point of view, the status of America becomes even more problematic. America is a non-Muslim, arguably a Christian country. Is America *dar al harb*? And if so is it religiously permissible to stay in America for an extended period of time or even permanently? Under what conditions are Muslims allowed to live in such places?

Some Muslims ask these questions, others do not. Not all Muslims are interested in religious justification of their presence in America. Some might not even be aware of the juridical terms discussed below. Moreover, some of them might be aware yet choose to ignore them in the face of some incongruity between the terms' implications and the reality of their own lives. People can choose to place themselves outside this particular juridical question by rejecting its relevance or avoid it altogether as a theoretical nuisance. Whether they embrace the relevance of the question or not, however, all Muslims engage in interpretation and produce a certain perspective on America (Haddad 2004: 32, Leonard 2003:154).

These questions have come to occupy a central place in the American Muslim discourse. Especially after 9/11, according to an American Muslim pundit, such questions create a moral dilemma that needs to be solved:

Many Muslims who see Islam and the U.S. in a state of conflict have enormous problems in beginning to think of themselves as American Muslims. They want the prosperity and the freedom of America, but not its foreign policy or its liberal culture. And Muslim leaders who oppose political assimilation without opposing [legal] naturalization inadvertently place Muslims in a morally delicate situation. There are no simple solutions to this moral dilemma. It will have to be resolved at the theological level. Changes in American attitudes and policies toward Islam and Muslims will also be helpful in this transition to citizenship within the mind of each American Muslim. The theological discussion will have to take American

Muslims beyond the *dar-al-Islam* (house of peace) and *dar-al-harb* (house of war) dichotomy (Khan 2002: 10).

Early Muslims considered living in American society a dangerous venture. It meant the risk of assimilation and moral decay. The students who constituted the kernel of American Muslim identity in the 1960's and 1970's wanted only to avoid the negative influence of American society (Schumann 2007: 11). This perception, however, changed over time (Mattson 2003: 203).

The terms or rather juridical tools available to Muslims for making sense of American space have outflanked the binary of *dar al Islam* versus *dar al harb*. The dichotomy, which existed so long as it was not challenged by direct experience, becomes problematic and insufficient when Muslims are actually in America. Reality interferes. The alternative or complementary concepts that were historically marginalized in the production of this binary are remembered, re-appropriated and even possibly invented by Muslims.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, in addition to *dar al harb* and *dar al Islam* Muslims in minority settings have brought back several notions, the most important two of which are *dar al*

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<sup>62</sup> Recent Muslim perspectives on this subject include calls for a generalized *darura* and reclamation of alternative juridical concepts. Below is an example of such a call.

The juristic discourse on Muslim minorities with regard to whether or not Muslims may reside in a non-Muslim territory and under what circumstances, the relationship of these Muslims to *dar al-Islam* and the ethical and legal duties that these Muslims owe to the Muslim law and to their host non-Muslim polity have been debated since the eighth century. Indeed, the juristic discourse on the issue has not been dogmatic. Other than the mutually exclusive concepts of *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*, the persistent existence of Muslim minorities voluntarily residing outside *dar al-Islam* challenged this dichotomous view. In that regard, Islamic jurisprudence has developed several mechanisms and concepts that facilitate compromise, such as duress (*ikrah*), necessity (*darura*), and public welfare (*maslaha*). As a result, an understanding of *dar al-ahd* (country of treaty, covenant), *dar al-aman* (country of security), *dar al-sulh* (country of truce), and *dar al-darura* (country of necessity) have come to be recognized as situations and environments in which Muslims may live in non-Muslim territories. Perhaps, in modern times, it is more precise to speak of "*asr al-darura*" (time of necessity) instead of *dar al-darura*, since for Muslims, to a great extent, living under *darura* conditions has become the norm in the global village and is more associated with the *Zeitgeist* rather than the geographical locality of one's residence. (Yilmaz 2002: 39)

*dawah* (abode of call, propagation) and *dar al ahd* (abode of treaty, contract). In place of the *dar al harb* -- *dar al Islam* dichotomy, we now have a continuum.

***The continuum of abodes: Dar al harb – Dar al dawah – Dar al ahd – Dar al Islam***

This continuum, of course, implies no teleology. It is rather a spectrum of juridical terms providing religious meaning or justification for different discourses Muslims develop with respect to America. In this part of the chapter, I shall highlight what is specific to each of these categories and the relationship between them as phases of a possible process of settlement. This process or spectrum can be both temporal and spatial.

There are two broad paradigms under which we can classify the major juridical tools. They are either mobilized under the paradigm of *darura* or they are construed as part of an existing legal order or products of a newly articulated code that caters to the needs of Muslims in the minority status. The first two categories, which fall under the paradigm of *darura*, are diasporic with respect to the American setting. The last two come under the paradigm of law and are employed by Muslims in their post-diasporic moment, those who see or want to see America as home. A more comprehensive juxtaposition of the four categories is provided in Figure 4.1.

<i>Darura</i> (exception / negative)		Law (rule / positive)	
<b>Abode of War</b> <i>(Dar al Harb)</i>	<b>Abode of Mission</b> <i>(Dar al Dawah)</i>	<b>Abode of Accord</b> <i>(Dar al Ahd)</i>	<b>Abode of Islam</b> <i>(Dar al Islam)</i>
War/chaos	Mission/visit	Peace/accord	Home/Islamic
External	Frontier	Neighbor	Home
T1 (1970s)	T2 (1980s)	T3 (1990s)	T4 (2000s)
Visitor	Newcomer	Resident	Citizen
Diasporic		Settled	

Figure 4.1. Stages and juridical tools of Muslim cultural settlement in the US.

In the following sections, I shall discuss the specifics of each of these categories.

What are the consequences of perceiving America as abode of war (*dar al harb*)? Who sees it as such and when? Such questions will be answered for each of the four categories used by Muslims as juridical tools or, to put it in Ann Swidler’s terms, as part of their juridical “toolkit” (Swidler, 1986). These juridical terms can be interpreted as symbolic stations in the cultural settlement of Muslims or moments of their internalization of America as a habitat.

### **ABODE OF WAR: An impossible homeland**

For the perspective that sees America as abode of war (*dar al harb*), America is *external* to Islam, and, as such, it is a source of anxiety and cultural threat.<sup>63</sup> This perception is based on a lack of knowledge about what goes on inside America. America,

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<sup>63</sup> It would be interesting to compare early American frontier discourse with the Muslim discourse depicting America as frontier. My intuition tells me that the association of the frontier with chaos, the devil and risk is a common thread in both cases. A topic not much discussed and yet worthy of noting here is that certain threads in the discussion of Muslim presence in America portray Islam and Muslims as a “frontier within” that needs to be (re)moved and pushed back. The calls for internment of Muslims and the alarmist idea of an “enemy within” espoused by some conservative pundits illustrate the persistence of frontier discourse in its post-territorial forms.

in this view, is a monolith—it is completely profane and without legitimately perceptible nomos. It has to be avoided unless there is emergency (*darura*, exception). America is a black box that can be treated only in its totality since it can be grasped—in this understanding—only from without.<sup>64</sup> The ideal type for this conception is a visitor; it can be said to represent the common understanding of Muslim immigrants in the 1970s.

Changing immigration policies in the 1960s and Cold War politics opened the door for Muslim immigrants and students. Interestingly enough, the students from Muslim countries who came to America to study not only created the nucleus of a Muslim community, but also laid the ground for the formation of a number of major organizations, including the *Muslim Students Association* (MSA) and later the *Islamic Society of North America* (ISNA). Those Muslims who happened to be in America in this period believed that they were there under *darura*. They saw themselves as an outpost of Islam inside American space. In keeping with this view, they had no connection to the space except for being in it for a short time of necessity. They were geographic and cultural orphans, people out of place. Their plans to go back home kept them always in a precarious position, unsettled. *Dar al harb* (abode of war) characterized the perception of those Muslims, mostly students from Muslim countries, who were either religious or became religious due to diasporic pressures during their studies at American institutions of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. They set out to acquire American science and technology without getting contaminated by its culture. Their plan to return home after the completion of their studies and their desire to avoid the influence of American culture

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<sup>64</sup> The same can be said for the perspective of some of the Muslims in Europe. In Tariq Ramadan's words, such Muslims are "living in Europe out of Europe. To avoid being absorbed into Western societies, they have found a refuge within community life... The aim is to be 'at home,' *in Europe but at home*" (Ramadan 1999: 186) [italics original].

were two defining features of their attitude towards American space. These students relied on funding from their home countries and were oriented towards their homelands.<sup>65</sup>

America was simply a meeting ground for Muslims from various countries. Within the framework of a Heideggerian conception of space, their “American space” did not fully exist. To the extent that care and involvement produce space (the world) for the situated subject, their American space was very small; their primary *concern* was political and cultural solidarity with the Muslim world and its rehabilitation through the acquisition of American scientific/technological knowledge. The institutions built in this era catered to students and were concerned almost exclusively with the preservation of Islamic identity against the corrosive influence of American society. Publications of the time, such as *MSA News* and later *Islamic Horizons*, depicted the American environment as an undifferentiated culture having nothing to do with Islam (Schumann 2007: 16). America was technologically superior but morally bankrupt, a perception that echoed Sayyid Qutb’s image of America.<sup>66</sup> In the eyes of these identity-centric, diasporic Muslims, America was an undifferentiated mass. America was at worst an impure place, at best a neutral space for the encounter and education of Muslim activists from Islamic countries.

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<sup>65</sup> Oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia had disproportionate ideological influence during the early decades of Muslim immigration to the United States.

<sup>66</sup> Sayyid Qutb, chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, visited and spent two years in the United States in 1948-50. Upon his return to Egypt he wrote an essay, “The America I Have Seen,” in which America represented everything that Islam was not. (Qutb 2000 [1951]). One section of the piece bears the title: “America: The Peak of Advancement and the Depth of Primitiveness.” Most of his analysis seems to be based on a cultural translation problem. In this almost unprecedented encounter between America and an Islamist, American reality is slaughtered in translation. Qutb hated America not for what America really was but for what he understood it to be.

Their orientation was thus overseas, towards the Islamic world. Their American location gave them extra space and allowed them to mobilize technical and ideological resources for what Benedict Anderson calls “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998: 58), which in this case meant long-distance Islamism. Even the notion of *dawah* which was activated in response to displacement – its temporariness notwithstanding—was an *introvert dawah* directed at students themselves. The purpose was to have “an impact on homelands by educating Islamic activists and preparing them for their future return” (Schumann 2007: 18). Inspired by the Islamic revivalist movements in Muslim countries, they interpreted their own experiences in terms of mobility, movement or mobilization. The idea of returning home turned their stay into a prolonged transit. America was not a place to dwell, it was not home. Therefore the ethos of living in America was a “deficient mode of care.”

Today, most Muslims would reject the idea of America as *abode of war* and might even contest the applicability of the term altogether. The culture of “America as *dar al harb*,” survives, therefore, mostly in old community literature and biographical narratives about “Muslims then.” One would expect the culture of *dar al harb* to have disappeared entirely over the last couple of decades, since today almost every Muslim sees Muslim presence in America as permanent. But it has not. I discovered this persistence when I talked to the imam of a mosque<sup>67</sup> in Detroit in 2007. This mosque, which has an Arabic name, is self-acknowledgedly *salafi*.<sup>68</sup> In terms of congregation, it

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<sup>67</sup> I have chosen to suppress the name of the mosque and refer to its imam by a pseudonym in deference to his concerns about publicity. He also expressed reluctance at the idea of recording the interview. The dialogue is based on my notes taken during our conversation.

<sup>68</sup> A movement in Sunni Islam, Salafism seeks to restore the golden age of Islam by purging what it perceives to be later cultural influences and innovations. This simplistic conception of Islam is a modern form of Puritanism.



appears to be predominantly Yemeni. Imam Talib, also from Yemen, is on a long-term visa and has been here for the last few years. One of the striking things about this mosque is that the imam does not speak any English at all and delivers his sermons only in Arabic. He does, however, use a translator. I interviewed him through one of the people who help translate his sermons and weekend classes. The following exchanges are selections from the interview.

I started by asking his opinion about the English language, since we were not able to communicate in it.

Question: When one immigrates to America, a lot of things change. For example, here all the Muslims speak English. What do you think about the English language?

Answer: English is good for giving *dawah*. When I came here there were some brothers who could speak both languages [English and Arabic]. That made it easy for me to do my own Islamic studies. If I go to English language classes, it will take a lot of driving. Also you know classes are mixed, men and women... Muslims should learn this language, of course. If you do not know the language, it is going to be hard. We should give *dawah*.

There are a lot of *masjids* [mosques] which claim to be *ahlul sunnah* [Sunni] but they actually are not spending enough time on *aqeedah* [creed]. Kids in this country get very little Islam. Here in this masjid we try to focus more on Islam so that kids don't get *shirkayat* and *khurafat* [violations of monotheism and deviation]. We want them to stay away from *shirk* [worshipping things other than the one God]. This is our focus.

Q: What do you think about the *dar al harb* and *dar al Islam* distinction? What is America in your view?

A: America is a *kuffar* country [the land of disbelief, *dar al kufr* / *dar al harb*]. It is a matter of who is dominant. The dominant identity in this country is *kuffar*. If we can have *dawah*, that is the most important thing. We need to show the people what Islam is. We should teach them.

Q: But Muslims have more freedoms here than in Muslim countries. Think of *hijab*, for example.

A: It is true we have more freedoms but it does not mean this country is better than the Muslim countries.

Q: Since you have plans to return to Yemen and won't stay in this country, what do you say to Muslims here, those who are going to stay.

A: I say, if they can go back, it is better for them. The future seems very hard here. It is hard to live as a family. It is hard. If something happens that will

be good: if the government *puts all the Muslims in one place*, that will be good. Then we can live without mixing.

Q: So you would like Muslims to be more isolated and by themselves?

A: Well, we can mix with them to give *dawah* but we should not lose our kids. They should not lose their *deen* [religion].

I left the mosque with some degree of bewilderment in that even though I had observed a whole spectrum of Muslims in the American context, this was a truly *extraordinary* case: even though many American Muslims believe that they live in “electronic internment” since 9/11, I have never met one who considered internment— be it electronic surveillance or physical imprisonment like what happened to Japanese-Americans during the second World War— to be desirable. Here was a Muslim who was “in” America and believed that the best thing that could happen to Muslims living in this country was to be placed in a ghetto or camp. Interestingly enough, the Detroit-Dearborn area is currently the only place in America that could approximate a ghetto (Abraham and Shryock 2000). Yet the significant concentration of Arab Muslims in the area still seemed insufficient to this imam, as far as the protection of Islamic identity was concerned. The only justification for Muslims to stay in this country was *dawah*; otherwise, America was a *kuffar* (infidel) country, *dar al harb* (an abode of war), and to protect their religion, Muslims should leave as soon as possible. America was an insecure place and could never qualify as a homeland. This insecurity was not so much about civil rights and liberties— concerns shared by many Muslims— but about religious reproduction and spiritual purity.

To inquire further into his mosque’s relationship to the American environment, I asked if they were involved in any interfaith activities. He replied: “No interfaith activity here. All our information (about Islam) is on the website. I say, go to call them to Islam

but not to listen to them. Those who go and say ‘We are the same, no difference,’ they are wrong. Call them to Islam.”

According to this introverted view of Islam and the Muslim community, America had to be avoided and when that was not possible, then the only legitimate form of involvement was *dawah*, which for this imam meant conversion. Any other form of involvement should be shunned. “Interaction” with the outside world was thus not a two-way street.<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising that this was the only mosque where they try to convert visitors, even Muslim ones, to their form of Islam. Other colleagues who visited this same mosque told me that they were approached with an intention to convert even though they had made it clear that they were there for research alone.

Most past Muslim immigrants had and some Muslims in the early stage of their immigration today still have a slightly tamer view of the American environment and the role of Muslims in that they perceive themselves as an outpost of Muslim geography in an alien land. As long as their presence is temporary, they comfortably continue to hold the view that America can be *abode of war*. This ideal typical perception of America as *abode of war/chaos* changes only under the influence of direct experience, interaction and the recognition of dwelling that is usually outside the control of the subjects. The concept of *dawah* (mission, call to Islam), which together with *darura* (necessity) is one of the two justifications for being in America, eventually outgrows the juridical category of *abode of war* and becomes the point of reference in itself. Limited engagement in the form of *dawah* ultimately leads to a perception of America as an open field for unlimited *dawah*. *Dawah* is no longer directed at other Muslim but the non-Muslim other. This

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<sup>69</sup> Although the imam and his mosque identify themselves as *salafi*, not all *salafi* imams would hold these ideas. The development of diplomatic language among immigrant imams and community leaders is an interesting thread for further research.

change of orientation also marks the transition to the next stage where America is perceived as a land of mission.

### **ABODE OF MISSION: An outpost in “the Land of Possibilities”**

*As abode of war*, America represented the absolute outside and an anti-homeland. *As abode of mission*, while still external to Islam, America is recognized as an adjacent space. As such, it becomes a *frontier*. It is a target of concerned interest or a destination of risky spiritual venture. In this conception, America is a field of exploration that is at once dangerous and potentially beneficial. The most significant change in the perception from the earlier one is that America is no longer a monolith. First, weak signs of differentiation emerge as the newcomer has either not made his final judgment about America or approaches it with caution. His presence is most likely temporary or in its early stages.

In the stage of *abode of mission*, the notion of *dawah* (mission) undergoes a shift in terms of orientation: now it explicitly targets non-Muslims. The introvert conception is replaced by an extrovert one as some involvement with America becomes possible. The primary concern is still the preservation of identity *through* a narrowly defined engagement with American society. Even though America is still in moral decay, Muslims are now seen as capable of contributing to its positive transformation and reluctant involvement comes to designate a desirable partial participation. A shift also occurs from activism which targets Muslim students to activism aimed at contributing to

an otherwise threatening environment. In this transformation, the Qur'anic idea of “promoting good and preventing evil” becomes a touchstone.<sup>70</sup>

If previously the Muslim world and America were polar opposites, this time around, even though they are still largely monoliths, they each acquire negative and positive aspects—the problems the Muslim world and some virtues of America are acknowledged. The Muslim world or past homelands now lose their sharpness and complexity in the mind's eye of the immigrant, and this distancing from the past homeland is compensated by the development of a comparably limited “nearness” to the American environment. In terms of community development, this approach characterizes the 1980's. Early signs of recognizing America as a “nation of immigrants” emerge and the possibility of somehow fitting in becomes imaginable for the Muslim immigrant.

Yet even though the beginnings of settlement are observed, America is still diasporic: this settlement has not yet fully disengaged itself from a movement that began elsewhere. Muslims who were in transit are now settled into “mobility” and outreach. In the process, *darura* (exception) becomes a conditional “stay.” One can stay, but only to perform *dawah!* That is, a shift occurs from conditional visit to conditional stay. A necessity-based risk has become an opportunity-based one.

As a consequence of the shift, calling America *abode of war* becomes increasingly difficult and the term itself is seldom employed. As Mustapha, a young Muslim I interviewed, stated, “If America is *dar al harb* [abode of war], what does that add to you? What matters more is whether you as a Muslim change yourself and your

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<sup>70</sup> This Qur'anic injunction charges Muslims with the responsibility of changing their environment in a positive way. It lends itself to multiple interpretations. Some groups use it as a justification for interventionist, authoritarian practices, while others (many African American Muslim groups, for instance), consider it an Islamic basis for social justice work.

environment.” The formerly monolithic and impure surface of America is now seen as receptive to the inscription of Islam. Along the same lines, an essay published in 1985 in *Islamic Horizons* claims that,

We cannot continue to throw out the baby of *dawah* with the bathwater of our disaffection towards this government and society. For clearly we have been placed here with a purpose... If we plan to leave tomorrow, we still have today to work, to do our share in remodeling what has been called a *dar al harb* –a home of hostility- into a *dar al Islam* –a home in which all Muslims can seek shelter. For wherever we are, our Home is Islam. (Omar 1985: 10, quoted in Schumann 2007: 21).

So Muslim institutions either change their orientation, or institutions with a new orientation emerge in their stead: institutions oriented toward “non-American” Muslims in America and the Muslim world are replaced by a “global Muslim” discourse with some localization. The *Islamic Society of North America* (ISNA), established in 1982 in response to the fact that more and more of the students who planned to return ended up staying and forming families in the US, is a perfect example of this new transformation. Now a Muslim community occupying North American space came into existence with early and small signs of localization and settlement. For instance, the essay quoted above and published in *Islamic Horizons* was titled, “Participation of Muslims in America as a *Land of Possibilities*” (Omar 1985: 9) [italics mine].

In addition, the Muslim community is no longer identified with students but with their families: ISNA would cater to this emergent community which is still diasporic but is now inclined toward settlement. Its institutions begin to engage the American environment, but only on the grounds of ideology and self interest aimed solely at the dissemination of Islam. Still this reluctant settlement and narrow involvement transforms the nature of the Muslim community from being a thin “outpost” of Muslims in an alien

land to a “thicker” extension of the global Muslim community at large. To sum up, the ideological transition from 1970s to 1980s is one from students to families, from MSA to ISNA, from avoidance to protectionism through partial involvement.

Though this mindset had its heyday in the 1980s, it can still be found in contemporary Muslim community within the US. I saw it reflected in some of my conversations with Muslim community leaders. One such example was Imam Haroon of “Masjidun-Nur” (Mosque of Light) in Detroit. Established in 1978, this inner-city mosque is at present predominantly African American. The imam himself is from the Caribbean (the island of Granada) and is ethnically South Asian. He had been serving as imam at this mosque since 1984 when I asked his opinion on several issues. Although very conservative and introverted, his views about the American setting were more nuanced than those of the previous imam in that— at least on a few registers— he thought that the American context was unusual.

Sometimes ulama overseas do not know the life here. They do not know how America is different. There are some necessities. You cannot say that women should not drive. If she is Muslim and her family is non-Muslim and against her, how can she call her brother to drive her to the hospital? Like this there may be necessities in America.

When asked about the distinction between *abode of war* and *abode of Islam*, he preferred to avoid the binary and emphasized instead the perception of America as “a land of possibilities” in the following manner:

I have been able to pray at the airport, at the mall or at the bus station. Since I’ve been here it has been very easy to live Islam. I don’t know what category America fits but we are free to live Islam and do *dawah*. Sometimes people are more welcoming. Once there was a non-Muslim woman, she invited us to her house when she saw that we were going to pray on the grass. She did not know us but she invited us to pray at her house.

[America] is Allah’s country. We’re here to invite people to Islam. We are here for the guidance. Some scholars say it is not permissible to stay in a non-

Muslim land. But what about those who are from here? Where will they go? The earth is vast and for making a living anywhere is OK. Some *sahabas* [companions of the prophet] did both living and *dawah*.

When asked how he views the future of Islam here, he noted, “I see a great future because of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Islam will dominate and not be dominated.’” Despite the relative openness to and appreciation of the American environment, his response to my question on interfaith activism, which I use as an index of involvement with the social environment, revealed the striking ambivalence produced by the perception of America as *abode of mission*.

No, we don’t do interfaith activities. My personal opinion, I don’t feel the need for it. They stay their way and we stay our way. We respect but don’t talk... I think it became more difficult after 9/11. But some non-Muslim African Americans started to wear *kufi* [Muslim skullcap] and say “as salamu alaikum” to support us. We have no hostility with others... The main thing is *dawah*, I don’t wanna use that word, but we work for *dawah*, it is an imperative for us.

*Dar al dawah* basically takes Muslim immigrants to the threshold of settlement and as such marks the limits of diasporic orientation. The negative connection with the environment (through the juridical device of *darura* (necessity)) is now replaced by a narrowed yet positive connection (based on a redefinition of *dawah* (mission)). At this point, the neat division “anything Muslim is good, anything American is evil” starts to erode. Yet the Muslim subject is still mentally located in another homeland and has only a limited justification for his presence in America.

### **ABODE OF ACCORD: From mission to dialogue**

As *dar al ahd* (abode of accord) America is *neighbor* to Islam and a party to an accord; it is a source of mutual benefit. America is religiously justified and protected by



religious laws such as the injunction that Muslims must obey the law of the land wherever they live. America thus becomes even more differentiated and emerges as a peaceful opportunity space for Muslims, but one that has not yet been fully internalized or naturalized. The benefits and opportunities now supersede the risks. This conception's ideal type is a resident: his presence is permanent with the reservation that it might one day be possible that he will have to leave. *Abode of accord* represents a cautious embrace and the early stage of settlement. Many Muslims interpret *abode of accord* with relative comfort due to its resonance with the social contract theories of American society. *Abode of accord*, therefore, symbolizes the first cultural encounter of the immigrant Muslim with American citizenship. While for *abode of war* and *abode of mission*, the Muslim just happens to be in America, in the conception of *abode of accord* he begins to see himself as part of a larger society in which he, too, has a stake. It thus allows Muslims to imagine a place of their own inside American society, creating the possibility of an American Muslim cultural "ghetto"— in the positive sense of the term— within a liberal society. More specifically, *abode of accord* represents a communitarian understanding of membership in American society, where private autonomy is slightly expanded and buttressed as an adequate domain for the survival of Islamic identity. The sense of belonging that *abode of accord* generates is located in the spectrum between a protected subject and a full citizen.

Muslims who see their new environment in this way no longer hold themselves apart from majority society, but still preserve their distinct identity. They share with the rest of the society a culture in which Islam seeks a place. The idea of *abode of accord*

therefore lends itself to a spectrum of existence from reluctant participation to hopeful and safe engagement with the American environment.

In 1999, the Mauritanian shaikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah was invited by the Zaytuna Institute, a neo-traditional center of Islamic learning based in California, to speak to American Muslims in the Bay Area. He delivered his lecture in Arabic, translated by American convert shaikh Hamza Yusuf.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly enough, the shaikh begins his lecture, a series of juridical recommendations for Muslims living as a minority in non-Muslim lands, with the recognition of this fact:

In contrast to Muslims living in the dominant Muslim world at large, you are, in many ways, strangers in a strange land. The Messenger of Allah said that the conditions of the stranger are blessed conditions. It also means "they have paradise" for bearing the burden of alienation. An Arab proverb is, "oh stranger in a strange land, be a man of courtesy and cultivation." The meaning of estrangement [is not that] you should not work with others or that you should avoid the dominant society and distance yourselves completely from it. (Bayyah 1999)

After examining the needs and conditions of Muslims in diaspora, the shaikh discusses the problem of the status of lands where Muslims are minorities. He criticizes the dichotomy of *abode of war* and *abode of Islam*.

Most people think that the world is divided into two abodes, the abode of peace and the abode of war. The abode of peace is the land of the Muslims, *dar al-Islam*, and the abode of war is everywhere else. In [former President] Nixon's book that I read a translated version of called *Seizing the Moment*, Nixon wrote a long chapter on the Islamic phenomenon of the modern world. One of the things Nixon said after praising Islam a great deal and saying many nice things about Islam is that one of the most fundamental problems with the Muslims is that they view the world as a dichotomy of two abodes: the abode of peace and the abode of war. So, the central aspect of international relationships with the Muslims is aggression; it is one of war. This idea is wrong. There are three abodes: there is the abode of peace, the abode of war, and then there is the *abode of treaty* where there is a contractual agreement between two abodes. (Bayyah 1999) [emphasis mine]

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<sup>71</sup> The transcript of this lecture is available at the Zaytuna Institute's website.

The shaikh thus explains the relationship between immigrant Muslims in America and their country of immigration by referring to his entry into the country. His personal border crossing becomes an illustration of entry into *abode of accord/contract*.

For instance, when I came into this country, they issued me a visa, and I signed something. In the issuance of the visa and my signing of it, a legally binding contract occurred. It was an agreement that when I came into this country, I would obey the laws and would follow the restrictions that this visa demanded that I follow. This was a contractual agreement that is legally binding according even to the divine laws. In looking at this, we have to understand that the relationship between the Muslims living in this land and the dominant authorities in this land is a relationship of peace and contractual agreement— of a treaty. This is a relationship of dialogue and a relationship of giving and taking. (Bayyah 1999)

The shaikh also articulates the conception of America as an *abode of treaty*. He continues:

The first essential thing is that you respect the laws of the land that you are living in... In this country, the ruling people are allowing you to call people to Islam. They are not prohibiting you... It is necessary for us to show respect to these people. Islam prohibits us from showing aggression towards people who do not show aggression towards us... We also have to be good citizens because an excellent Muslim is also an excellent citizen in the society that he lives in (Bayyah 1999).

Muslim discourses, including those of the Zaytuna Institute which hosted Shaikh Bin Bayyah in 1999, have changed since then in response to the aftermath of 9/11. Zaytuna's change of orientation can be traced through the writings of its leaders, among them Imam Zaid Shakir.<sup>72</sup>

As far as Muslim community leadership is concerned, the idea of *abode of accord* appears to have been the dominant conception in 1990s. Since 9/11, it has been criticized

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<sup>72</sup> As a matter of fact, the transformation that Shakir has personally experienced and which partly represents the trend in the Muslim community can be observed clearly in two interviews that Shakir gave to Bill Moyers of PBS in January 18, 2002 and in June 22, 2007.

by Muslim public intellectuals who urge a complete transition to the conception of America as an *abode of Islam*. Muqtedar Khan, a Muslim professor of political science, who became prominent after 9/11, finds the idea of *abode of accord* an inadequate and morally problematic position for Muslims in the United States (Khan 2002: 8). From another perspective,<sup>73</sup> Tariq Ramadan, a European Muslim intellectual, finds the same term untenable due to its dependence on the old dichotomy of *abode of war / abode of Islam*. Instead he proposes *dar al dawah* (abode of call)—using a sense different from my own discussion above—and he even calls for a total abandonment of the idea of *abodes*: “At a time when we are witnessing a strong current of globalization, it is difficult to refer to the notion of *dar* (abode) unless we consider the whole world as an abode. Our world has become a small village and, as such, it is henceforth *an open world*.” The whole world, according to Ramadan, is therefore *abode of call/mission*. We should “stop translating the notion of *dar* in its restrictive meaning of “abode” and prefer the notion of *space*, which more clearly expresses the idea of an *opening of the world*, for Muslim populations are now scattered all over the world” (Ramadan 2002: 147). This global space is *dar al dawah* (space of testimony/mission) where Muslims “bear witness before all mankind.”

### **ABODE OF ISLAM: “Thinking without accent”**

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<sup>73</sup> In my discussion, while talking about the cultural settlement of Islam in the United States, I take the liberty of drawing on the European perspective. This is not because I treat both cases under the general rubric of Western Islam—although that would be fully justified— but because intellectual discourses circulate back and forth across the Atlantic and need to be analyzed in conversation with each other. A simple illustration of this is the attempt on the part of Notre Dame University to hire Tariq Ramadan, which created enthusiasm among the new generation of American Muslims and stirred a debate on academic freedom when the State Department revoked Ramadan’s visa on obscure grounds and denied him entry to the United States in 2004.

Muslim political activist and president of the American Muslim Alliance, Agha Saeed, encouraging Muslim political participation, wrote that Muslims need generations who “not only speak without accent but also think without accent” (Saeed 2002: 55). To him “thinking without accent” means changing the orientation of Muslims in America from preoccupation with the Muslim world to taking an interest in American domestic issues. Criticizing immigrant generations for being too much invested in goings-on in their countries of origin, Saeed finds hope in new generations of Muslims who would instead regard America as both home and homeland.

In the conception of *abode of Islam* or *abode of peace*, the ideal type is a citizen, a person who feels at home in America thereby achieving equilibrium or symmetry between the subjective culture (Muslim identity) and the objective culture (American culture). America no longer remains a mismatched habitat for a Muslim habitus developed elsewhere. Rather it becomes an American Muslim habitus in an American habitat. As such, even immigrant parents who might not consider America their homeland would not hesitate to call it the homeland of their children.

When I asked a Bangladeshi imam in Hamtramck, Michigan, what he thought of America as a new home for Muslims, he replied, “There is no return, we have settled here.” When I said, “But you know there are Muslims who have reluctance because of the distinction of two abodes...” his response came very quickly.

Oh no, no. I take one poet, he said: [quotes first in Bengali, then translates freely] “China is mine. Arabian peninsula is mine. Japan is mine. America is mine. I’m a Muslim. All the world is my country.” That is my understanding. I decided to live over here, I’m a citizen of this country, this is my country. It is my children’s country.

In the three previous perceptions of America, Muslims had remained in their pre-political state in relation to American politics. It is only with the conception of America as *abode of Islam/peace* that membership in American society begins to translate into active citizenship and political participation. If *abode of accord (dar al ahd)* designated an American environment not incompatible with Islam, *abode of peace (dar al Islam)* designates an American environment that is actually perceived as Islamic. Muslims who regard America as *abode of peace (dar al Islam)* actually consider American values to be lost or alienated Islamic values. As Ingrid Mattson, the current president of ISNA, notes:

Among the most interesting efforts to permit Muslims a full embrace of American identity is the attempt to show that the constitutional democratic structure of America is almost equivalent to the political structure of an ideal Islamic state—in other words, a dialectic in which a redefinition of Islam meets a particular definition of America so that American democracy is identified with Islamic *shura* (consultation) and freedom of religion is identified with the Qur’anic statement “there is no compulsion in religion.” (Mattson 2003: 207).

The legal structures of democratic society become an extension of Islamic political order, if not an unnoticed embodiment of it. On the European front, Tariq Ramadan argues that abiding by the law of the land is an extension of following Islamic law.

*Implementing the Sharia* [Islamic law], for a Muslim citizen or resident in Europe, is explicitly to respect the constitutional and legal framework of the country in which he is a citizen. Whereas one might have feared a *conflict of loyalties*, one cannot but note that it is in fact the reverse, since faithfulness to Islamic teachings results in an even more exacting legal *implantation* in the new environment. *Loyalty to one’s faith and conscience requires firm and honest loyalty to one’s country*: the *Sharia* requires honest citizenship within the frame of reference constituted by the positive law of the European country concerned (Ramadan 2002: 172).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> “Wherever a Muslim, saying ‘I testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger’ is in security and able to perform his/her fundamental religious duties, he/she is *at home* for the prophet taught us that the whole world is a mosque” (Ramadan 2002: 144). [italics original]

The perspective identifying Islam with American values tends to emerge among American-born children of immigrants (i.e., second and third generations) and convert Americans seeking harmony in their double identity. For example, Robert Dickson Crane, a former advisor to President Nixon and convert to Islam, writes in his *Shaping the Future: Challenge and Response*, that “the basic principles of Islamic law are identical to the basic premises of America’s founding fathers, but both Muslims and Americans have lost this common heritage” (Crane 1997). This was the implicit theme of the keynote speech that Hamza Yusuf of Zaytuna Institute delivered in 2007 in Chicago at the annual convention of ISNA. He argued that not only are Muslim and American values aligned, but American Muslims are the true inheritors and present-day bearers of “old-fashioned American values” which otherwise have been lost in the modern world.

Similarly Mirza A. Beg, a Muslim freelance writer, wrote the following in an essay posted on several Muslim websites advocating Muslim participation in American democracy.

America has been a land of immigrants ever since the founding of the Republic. Though European in the beginning, in the last few decades, it has welcomed all, irrespective of color, ethnicity or religion. [...]

As Muslims, Islam enjoins us to be just and truthful, in thought, works and deeds; as well as be respectful of other religions while practicing the tenets of Islam. As Americans we cherish the constitution and the bill of rights. *America is our home* and our children’s future. [my emphasis-- MB]

Democratic norms are embedded in Islamic heritage. [...] The only way for a peaceful religion to flourish is in a democratic setting, without coercion. Freedom is a yearning of all-human souls. The quest of centuries for equality and justice led to the realization, that the only guaranty of individual freedom is to guarantee freedom for all, within a constitutional framework. It culminated in the pluralistic American democracy.

This new ‘Muslim homeland’ can be considered more Islamic than most if not all Muslim countries. A land of freedom (especially religious freedom) and democracy, America is a heterogeneous arena of good and bad, right and wrong. Just like historically Muslim lands, America also has its share of bad things. But it is up to Muslims to live Islam. They can contribute to its culture and society not only by their faith but also through their hard work and service. America is no longer an opportunity space or a land of possibilities; it is a privilege for Muslims. As such it places them in a special status with regard to both America and the Muslim community at large. American Muslims see themselves as having a special location and a historical responsibility—indeed, a number of contemporary Muslim intellectuals have called it a “manifest destiny” (Khan, 2002:1). American Muslims could even come to lead the Muslim community at large (the *ummah*).

Muslim writers publish articles with such titles as “Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness are Islamic Values.” The pursuit of happiness— which had been regarded by Qutb, under the paradigm of *abode of war/chaos*, as antithetical to Islam— is now seen as part of Islam. Islam becomes an *American religion*, part of the landscape of American civil religion in the mind of Muslims themselves. Interfaith consciousness matures and interfaith activism intensifies. Victor Ghalib Begg, a local champion of interfaith activism and board member of the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, asked at the 2007 ISNA convention, “Where is Muslim ecumenicalism? Protestants and Catholics had their “ecumenical” moment and are now well past it, this is a stage we Muslims should also go through, both among Muslims and with the non-Muslims.”



Now America is home and the Muslim world is the target of outreach. At the stage of America as *abode of Islam*, the shift of perspectives is complete. Muslims see things from the “point of view” (i.e., location) of their new home/land, America. They are now set to make strategic incursions into the Muslim world, seeking to derive benefits from it (in the form of cultural resources) while avoiding its problems (corruption, authoritarianism). Whereas previously only converts had behaved in this way, it now becomes a common practice among the children of American immigrants. New generations of Muslims often criticize the “cultural Islam” of their parents, which they see as immigrant confusion of culture with religion. They want to dissociate Islam from its Middle Eastern or South Asian “baggage” and make it an *American* religion. Often they ignore the fact that America also comes with its own “culture,” that “pure Islam” without a local culture is nowhere to be found. What had once been approached with suspicion (i.e., America, the *abode of war/chaos*) is now naturalized and what was natural for their parents (i.e., overseas culture) has now become an object of suspicion.

The signs of autonomization of Islam can be seen in the words of Maher Hathout, a Muslim community leader, who spoke at a Muslim conference in the early 2000s, stating: “As much as we can make clear that Muslim-American identity is not a natural extension of the Middle East, the better off we will be.”<sup>75</sup> As American Muslims gain relative autonomy vis-à-vis other Muslims, America becomes in their eyes an increasingly complex entity. America presents manifold eidetic appearances while the Muslim world shrinks to a few ideal types. The process of autonomization of American Islam is best illustrated in a piece that Imam Zaid Shakir of Zaytuna Institute wrote in

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<sup>75</sup> I should note that the change of political orientation is still ongoing. There has been a shift in the American Muslim “political *qibla*” from Jerusalem to Washington, from the question of Palestine to domestic American Muslim issues.

response to the Danish cartoon crisis<sup>76</sup> that broke out in September 2005. In “Clash of the Uncivilized: A Response to the Cartoon Controversy,” Shakir criticized the Muslim protestors in the Middle East and elsewhere for ignoring the consequences of their irrational behavior for Muslims living in the West.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the current campaign to “Assist the Prophet,” for many converts, like this writer, is the implicit assumption that there is no *dawah* work being undertaken here in the West, and no one is currently, or will in the future enter Islam in these lands. Therefore, it does not matter what transpires in the Muslim East. Muslims can behave in the most barbaric fashion, murder, plunder, pillage, brutalize and kidnap civilians, desecrate the symbols of other religions, trample on their honor, discard their values and mores, and massacre their fellow Muslims. If any of that undermines the works of Muslims in these Western lands, it does not matter. If it places a barrier between the Western people and Islam, when many of those people are in the most desperate need of Islam, it does not matter. If our Prophet, peace and blessings of God upon him, had responded to those who abused him in Ta’if with similar disregard, none of the generations of Muslims who have come from the descendants of those transgressors would have seen the light of day (Shakir 2006).

Shakir’s critique of “Muslims in the East” represents a threshold moment in the separation of American Islam from its imagined origins in a Muslim world growing increasingly unrecognizable in the eyes of American Muslim. And as he goes on to note, this symbolic separation is something truly remarkable:

As Muslims in the West, we may be approaching the day when we will have to “go it alone.” If our coreligionists in the East cannot respect the fact that we are trying to accomplish things here in the West, and that their oftentimes ill-considered actions undermine that work in many instances, then it will be hard for us to consider them allies... No one from the Muslim east consults us before launching these campaigns. We have a generation of Muslim children here who have to go to schools where most of them are small minorities facing severe peer pressure. Their faith is challenged and many decide to simply stop identifying with Islam. Is that what they deserve? We have obedient, pious Hijab wearing women, who out of necessity must work, usually in places where they are the only

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<sup>76</sup> A Danish newspaper, the *Jyllands-Posten*, published twelve highly unflattering cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, which provoked responses in the Muslim world that ranged from a boycott of Danish goods to violent street protests, including the torching of the Danish embassy in Syria.

Muslims. Should their safety, dignity, and honor be jeopardized by the actions of Muslims halfway around the world? (Shakir 2006)

The process of autonomization of American Islam is accelerated by the arrival of second and third generation American Muslims who make fun of their immigrant parents and Islamophobic non-Muslim compatriots. The rise of Muslim comedians, especially in the post-9/11 era, amply attests to this transformation.<sup>77</sup> The emergence of an American Muslim ethos and the development of a sense of being at home in America reverses the relationship between the *abode of peace* and the *abode of chaos*. America becomes the land of order and pure reality, while the homeland of immigrant parents retreats into chaos and anomie. Now, the Muslim world is seen through an American lens and judged *from* that location.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has taken a phenomenological approach to the way immigrant Muslims eliminate their sense of homeland *insecurity* and gradually come to see America as a new homeland. As Muslims dwell in America, either the American *nomos* becomes legible to them or they introduce a new Islamic *nomos* onto the American surface. Often the two possibilities converge.

This discussion of the juridical tools that help immigrant Muslims feel at home offers some theoretical insights. The cultural transition from immigrant to citizen, from being “in” to being “of” America is made possible by a gradual internalization of the American habitat. Once interaction between *habitus* and *habitat* reaches equilibrium, the view through American lenses springs into focus. The immigrant Muslim is re-situated as

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<sup>77</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 7, “Funny Jihad: Muslim Comedy Takes Flight.”

an American Muslim. Phenomenologically speaking, as we cannot be everywhere, there is no view from nowhere. Our situatedness creates nearness and distance. Muslim views of America are shaped by their relative exposure to American space and the degree of their involvement with it.

Acquiring a new homeland requires a new ethos. The case of Muslim immigrants demonstrates how an initially negative ethos turns into a positive one as the Muslim immigrant who shied from contact with the American environment is replaced by a citizen who is fully immersed in it, through such modes of care as interfaith activism and political participation.

As I have noted earlier, a guest who stays for too long is no longer a guest but a lodger. Naturalization and citizenship are temporal processes; they involve something beyond the inclusion of the immigrant in the new homeland. The sense of cultural membership develops only after the immigrant internalizes his or her new habitat.

Transition from exception (*darura*) as a paradigm to the reconstruction of legal order on a previously anomic space also has wider implications. The way exception (*darura*) culminates in law parallels the process by which the lifeworld yields ideal types. Sociological attention needs to be paid to the primacy of experience and lifeworld over ideal types or established categories. This chapter demonstrates how the *abode of chaos* / *abode of peace* binary faces an eruption of experience and is shattered into a plurality of new categories (*abode of mission* and *abode of accord*) and how, with these new categories, the Muslim lifeworld in America becomes religiously meaningful and legitimate.

## PART II: CITIZENSHIP PRACTICES

### CHAPTER 5

#### **Citizen Aliens: CAIR and the Rights of Muslims in the U.S.**

The best criteria by which to decide whether someone has been forced outside the pale of the law is to ask if he would benefit by committing a crime. If a small burglary is likely to improve his legal position, at least temporarily, one may be sure he has been deprived of human rights. For then a criminal offense becomes the best opportunity to regain some kind of human equality, even if it be as a recognized exception to the norm. The one important fact is that this exception is provided for by law. As a criminal even a stateless person will not be treated worse than another criminal, that is, he will be treated like everybody else. Only as an offender against the law can he gain protection from it.

—Hannah Arendt (1973: 286)

#### **Introduction**

I decided to start this chapter with an epigraph from Arendt, who wrote about the philosophical meaning and historical consequences of statelessness in interwar Europe.

What she says about statelessness is crucial for understanding the nature of the relationship between people and the law. As the most radical form of exclusion and dehumanization, statelessness is a condition where human rights and civil rights are de-linked, where bare life is detached from the law that assigns it a place and a voice. In Foucauldian language, subjectedness to the law is what produces human beings as subjects. A stateless person falls outside the pale of the law: he lacks *nomos*. Because he

is metaphysically unformatted, it becomes impossible to commit a crime against him—there are no boundaries to be transgressed. Modern day prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo fall into this category; we see them stripped of their clothes, toyed with and humiliated, piled into pyramids of bodies. People of this category, says Agamben, “may be killed but cannot be sacrificed” (Agamben 1998: 8). When law—the metaphysical mantle that produces human beings—is lifted from over them, they lose their “right to have rights” (Arendt 1973: 296, Somers 2006: 35-63).

The conditions I am going to discuss here are by no means that severe, but a similar logic applies. Statelessness certainly reduces human beings to what Arendt calls “the scum of the earth.” Arendt’s reasoning, I believe, also implies that there are varying degrees of being “within the pale of the law.” One can imagine a continuum ranging from a dehumanized stateless person, to a legally recognized criminal, to a legally neglected citizen, to a legally recognized citizen. Even for those within the compass of the law, there are varying degrees of protection (Bosniak 2006: 4).

Let me turn now to the relationship between Muslim life and American law after 9/11. In the introduction to this dissertation I argued that as a collective neurosis, 9/11 has produced a situation where the status of Muslims shifted from “invisible strangers” to that of “extremely visible strangers.” If Muslims inside America were in some sense “legally neglected citizens,” the crime of 9/11, although connected to them in the most tenuous possible fashion, imposed on them a variety of new legal forms. I will touch briefly on a few of these accidents of citizenship here, before turning to the real meat of my discussion.

9/11 has transformed non-citizen, non-American Muslims (in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere) into objects of American sovereignty, differentiating them into enemy and friend or good Muslim and bad Muslim (Mamdani 2004). Those who were outside the scope of American law were nonetheless touched by her sovereignty. Those who were encompassed by the law, however, experienced a tectonic shock. And a few of them fell off. Some citizens were designated as “enemy combatants” and removed outside the pale of the law, albeit temporarily. John Walker Lindh (the so-called American taliban) and Yasser Hamdi (also an American citizen) are two famous cases (Cole 2003: 4). The metaphysical mantle of the law was lifted from over them. Actually, the receding boundary of law landed squarely between them: while Walker was eventually brought back into the legal fold, Hamdi was forced to renounce his American citizenship as a condition of his deportation to another country. From the beginning, Hamdi’s citizenship was treated as “accidental” (Nyers 2006: 22).

As you trace the receding shoreline of the law, you begin to come across new categories of people. Some are citizens whose connections with foreigners seem to have been used to implicate them in crimes. In this group are two Muslim members of the U.S. army, Ahmad Al Halabi and Chaplain James Yee, both married to Syrian nationals, who were accused of espionage while stationed at Guantanamo. The story of James Yee, in particular, is reminiscent of the Dreyfus Affair. The government was finally compelled to drop all charges against him, but only after much legal posturing and expense. Others are illegal immigrants—many of whom have lived here peaceably and productively for years—who, caught by the immigration authorities, seek only to return to their countries of origin, but find themselves stuck between the law and extralegality. Osama Siblani, the

publisher of *Arab American News*, a Michigan weekly, said in a public lecture (03/23/2007): “I receive letters from prisons. Lebanese, Iraqi, Pakistani... all kinds of people who need to be deported but can’t because they don’t have passports. They beg to be helped.” Legal scholars like David Cole argue that sacrificing the rights of immigrants/aliens for the security of citizens will eventually lead to the loss of the rights of citizens themselves (2003: 17). Arendt observed a similar phenomenon: “Once a number of stateless people were admitted to an otherwise normal country, statelessness spread like a contagious disease” (1973: 285).

Having crossed this littoral of fractured and receding citizenship, we reach the body of mainstream Muslims who are full legal citizens. They are protected by the law but, unlike their non-Muslim fellow citizens, are under intense scrutiny and surveillance. Many of them believe that they are seen as “guilty until proven innocent.”

The impact of 9/11 on this final and largest group of Muslims, I would like to argue, has been ambiguous. It includes the distress of exclusion and surveillance but also, counterintuitively, the benefits of recognition. Though painfully, the gap between American Muslims and the law has been narrowed. A law that was not particularly sensitive to them became much more so after 9/11. This close encounter between Muslim citizens and the law has produced the category of “victim citizen.”

In what follows, I engage in a discussion of the relationship between victimhood and citizenship as it is articulated in the advocacy work of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). I begin with a brief history of CAIR and then move on to the ways in which CAIR contributes to protecting the civil rights of Muslims and producing them as American citizens.



## **American Muslim Organizations in the 1990s**

The history of Muslim institutions in the United States at the national level is not very long. The *Islamic Society of North America*, today the largest umbrella organization for Muslims, was started in 1982 when the members of the diasporic Muslim Student Association (founded in 1963) came to the realization that their stay in America was not temporary, after all. In the naming of those institutions, Muslims treated America as an undifferentiated entity. Foreign Muslim students, reflecting their experience as outsiders in America, and Black Muslims, for whom Islam was then an oppositional identity, all defined themselves in an external relation to America. When the *Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America* was transformed into an orthodox Islamic community under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, Black American Muslims named their new organization *The World Community of Al-Islam in America*.

Over time, however, we see increasing differentiation of America in the eyes of Muslims and a consequent specialization in the institutions dealing with the complex entity called America. At the same time there was also a change in focus from overseas to domestic affairs. This shift is discernible in the character of organizations launched in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The 1990s, in particular, saw a real explosion of Muslim institutions. This was partly in response to a growth spurt on the part of the Muslim community. Formation of civil rights advocacy groups and professional associations in the 1990's marked the transition from diasporic orientation to cultural settlement. CAIR is one of the many organizations launched in this period. Others include the American Muslim Council and the American Muslim Alliance. By the end of the decade, despite

their youth, American Muslim organizations were celebrating their first concrete achievements. The first stamp celebrating Muslim holidays (*Eid ul adha* and *Eid ul fitr*) was released in 2001, shortly before 9/11. The Clinton administration and the State Department hosted Ramadan iftaar dinners with American Muslim leaders. The year 2001 was also a threshold year in Muslim political participation. An umbrella organization of various Muslim political affairs committees endorsed George W. Bush in exchange for his promise to repeal the Secret Evidence Act. Over the objections of African American Muslim organizations, most immigrant Muslims voted Republican in expectation of the greater recognition promised by Bush.

9/11 brought this string of successes to a screeching halt. The American Muslim Committee, perhaps the most active Muslim lobbying organization, fell into obscurity. One of its officials told me in 2003 that the White House was no longer answering their phone calls. The organization became practically defunct. CAIR was perhaps the only Washington-based Muslim advocacy organization to survive the fallout of 9/11.

### **Development of CAIR**

CAIR was established in 1994 by Omar Ahmad, Nihad Awad and Ibrahim Hooper. Ahmad is currently a board member, Awad is executive director and Hooper is communications director of the organization. Ahmad and Awad are students turned activists and naturalized immigrants, while Hooper is a journalist and a convert to Islam. When they opened a two-person office on K Street in Washington, as Awad writes in an essay that he gave me,

We inherited two great challenges. The first was the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the American media, and the effects of that negative image on public

perception and public policy. The second challenge was the lack of interest and motivation among Muslims themselves to do anything about it.

Awad is an ethnic Palestinian who came to America from Jordan in 1984. While pursuing his studies in engineering, he also became active in Muslim community affairs in Minnesota, but he grew somewhat disillusioned with their efforts.

We had annual conventions held by ISNA-like organizations for Muslim students and their families since the 1960s, but their focus was on spiritual development, internal affairs and the problems of Muslims abroad.

What was lacking was engagement with the larger society and public institutions. Awad believes that his awakening to the need for a Muslim institution oriented toward improving the image of Muslims and promoting their engagement with American society happened at the time of the Gulf War. “Though tragic for the Middle East, it proved catalytic for the Muslim community in America.” Muslim Americans were in a sense forced out of their lethargy when they became targets of anti-Arab sentiment.

In the first year of its establishment, CAIR organized a few anti-discrimination campaigns. In September of 1994, a Muslim woman reported an offensive greeting card to the CAIR office. The card depicts a veiled woman with the words, “Rather than confront her morbid fear of germs, Millicent changed her name to Yazmine and moved to Tehran.” Inside the card read: “So you’re feeling like Shiite. Don’t Mecca big deal out of it.” The campaign against the postcard company, Recycled Paper Greetings, lasted for two months. Eventually CAIR persuaded RPG to apologize and stop producing the card.

The real turning point in CAIR’s young life, however, came with the Oklahoma City bombing. When Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in

Oklahoma in 1995 there was an immediate backlash against Muslims. When I asked Awad about CAIR's response, he said:

When that happened we had less than a thousand dollars in our account. I got a ticket and borrowed a cell phone. A reporter got me inside the area closed for investigation. Ibrahim sent a news release that we'll have a press conference on the spot. That press conference was historic. Later we met with the governor of Oklahoma and gave a check from the local Muslim community in Oklahoma to help the victims.

The same year, CAIR published its first civil rights report, "Rush to Judgment" and started to raise more funds. In Awad's words, "one success led to another" and CAIR emerged as the main civil rights group for American Muslims. CAIR owes its rise to a series of crises that have led to backlash against American Muslims. Each crisis becomes an opportunity for CAIR to establish itself as the legitimate voice of the American Muslim community.

CAIR is involved in a variety of advocacy work. Among other projects, the organization has tackled survey research (producing "The Mosque in America: A National Portrait"), grassroots mobilization (a voter registration drive), condemnation of acts of terrorism (declaring a "fatwa against terrorism" in cooperation with the *Fiqh Council of North America*), protesting and preempting media stereotypes (the villains in "The Sum of All Fears," a film by Paramount Pictures, were changed to neo-Nazis following objections from CAIR about stereotyping of Muslim characters), and mediating cases of commercial- and employment-based discrimination (Nike was prevented from selling sneakers emblazoned with "Allah" in Arabic script ; Liz Claiborn was discouraged from producing pants with Qur'anic verses printed on them).

When an opportunity for an internship at CAIR arose, I took it. In a way, CAIR became my entry point to the world of Muslims in the United States. CAIR provided me with the exposure to the flows of people, ideas and practices I needed to familiarize myself with the community and its national-level institutions.

### **Inside CAIR**

During the summer of 2003, I spent two months working as an intern at CAIR's national headquarters in Washington. I was one of a dozen interns. I was assigned to the research department, where my task was to update a database of Muslim institutions in several states. I would place phone calls to those institutions to verify the contact information listed on the database. I was struck by the fact that, even though I introduced myself as calling from CAIR, a significant number of the contacts were reluctant to give information about their institutions. Around this time the government crackdown on Muslim charities was intensifying. A second lesson I learned from my otherwise boring phone job was the degree of mobility of American mosques. Many "masjids" (mosques) were no longer to be found at their old phone numbers. Small mosques—which tend to have informal congregations—were even more mobile than established ones. I wondered if this had to do with the 9/11 backlash and growing sense of insecurity within the community. Even large mosques' answering machines would sometimes say that they could not give directions to the mosque because of security concerns.

I would occasionally have informal conversations with the people at the other end of the phone. Some of the respondents told me that they "had never heard of CAIR." (CAIR's community outreach department needed to work harder, I realized.) A

Bangladeshi respondent explained how there are “more liberties in America than in Muslim countries”—a statement you can hear from many Muslims. The tone of another respondent’s comments was different. He was the representative of a Muslim charity in the Midwest. He said that their organization had been visited by the FBI. Since then “the name of our organization is on the news. This has a negative impact. People are scared about donating.” When I asked what it meant to be an American Muslim, his response was: “You live by the laws of the land. You expect protection and equality. There should not be any difference.” He went on to complain about “some media outlets show[ing] Islam as evil. We need to inform people about Muslims. Muslims are regular folks who eat, drink etc... We want to educate our children... Americans are nice, open to learn. They want to listen. We should build bridges.”

Since CAIR was located two blocks from the Capitol, we attended numerous congressional hearings. On the second day of my internship I found myself in the halls of the capitol building attending a public forum organized by the American Civil Liberties Union. The forum, “Justice for All: Selective Enforcement in Post 9/11 America,” took place before Senators Edward Kennedy and Patty Murray. The testimony discussed mandatory detention, lengthy detentions without charge, holding immigrants ordered deported, selective enforcement of obscure immigration infractions, secrecy in immigration detention, and eroding accountability. It also touched on the alienation of immigrant communities, including “voluntary” interviews of Arab and Muslim males, and the recently-imposed requirement of Special Registration for Arab and Muslim males.

The ACLU presentation was accompanied by the stories of four victims of detention and discrimination. One of them, Asif Iqbal, was a New York Muslim who found himself on the “No-Fly List” because he shared the name of a terrorist suspect held at Guantanamo Bay. After being repeatedly denied boarding or interrogated by law enforcement authorities prior to boarding, Iqbal sought assistance from CAIR. He gave spoken testimony that day. It is a long quote, but a useful illustration of the post-9/11 challenges some citizens and civil rights groups face.

I have been repeatedly discriminated against at airports across America solely because of my name, “Asif Iqbal.” I think it is important to note that in Pakistan, my name is as common as John Smith is here. Since the initial implementation of the “No-Fly List” by TSA, passengers like myself have been denied boarding simply because our names are the same or similar to that of a suspect on the no-fly list. Let me describe you what it is like for people like myself to go through the routine process of checking in at the airport. Every time I check in for a flight, the airline computer terminal locks up because my name matches a name on the No-Fly List. I am then asked to step aside while they contact local law enforcement. Upon their arrival, I am questioned, often in front of a whole line of passengers and eventually given clearance from them. Unfortunately this isn’t the end of it. After I’m given clearance by local officers, the airline representative is then prompted to contact the FBI and other government agencies for further clearance. In some instances, the FBI has responded by coming to the airport to further interrogate me. Finally, after a tedious run of questions and answers and clearance from the appropriate persons, I am allowed to board my flight. The sense of relief I feel when finally cleared for boarding is quickly diminished when I remember that I will have to repeat this whole process again on my return flight. On several occasions this process has caused me to miss my flights and in some instances has forced me to lose a day’s work.

My travel goes well beyond vacation travel once in a while. I work for BearingPoint Inc. as a Senior Consultant out of the Manhattan office. My job requires 100% travel and therefore I hold Elite Status with Continental and US Airways. I typically travel every Monday morning to my client’s site and fly every Thursday evening to my home in Rochester, NY. Like many other Americans, I had my own apprehensions about traveling after the September 11 attacks and I must admit that initially, seeing the extra security helped to lessen my feelings of anxiety. While I understand the need for some of the vigorous measures taken by airport security, I feel there must be a better way to handle this situation. Being stopped the first time was acceptable, but each and every time I travel? Not to mention the fact that each and every experience has been extremely humiliating and emotionally draining. Since February of 2002, I have

been trying to get some kind of relief from the government so that I do not have to be subjected to this when I travel.

CAIR and ACLU have been consistently following up with TSA to get updates on when a new procedure would be implemented, however, as yet, no definitive timeline has been given. Instead, TSA and other government agencies involved passed the buck when questioned about the implementation of a relief procedure. Which leaves me today wondering when, if ever, a new system will be activated to give me relief and allow me to travel as freely as other Americans?

When we came back to the office I asked Laurie, a CAIR staff member, about Iqbal's case. Laurie said she was frustrated with the lack of progress in this case despite her prolonged efforts. "His name," she said, "is like John Smith" and because "there is a terrorist with the same name they don't clear his name from the list." "There are multiple lists" she complained. "They keep shuffling everything around. Bureaucracy is expanding and moving. I think it is part of the strategy so that people would not know where to go."

Even when we cannot solve the problem, she said "it makes a difference for any Muslim to have the support of an organization like CAIR.

It makes a huge difference. I have several people who we never worked on their case at all but they call me once every two months to let me know that they're still OK, they are still alive, and that they haven't been deported. Knowing that someone else is paying attention and watching out what is happening to them is huge. Especially in areas where you are the only Muslim, the only one dealing with this thing...

Laurie works on issues related to government affairs, the FBI, and Homeland Security. She once told me about the case of a young American Muslim who had been court martialed. She attended the hearing and said that "they are paying attention a little more" when someone is observing the proceedings. Coming from CAIR makes people react differently, she said:



The minute they notice there is an outside organization watching, they've changed. Alhamdulillah [thank God], it ended positively. I have no doubt if we were not involved it would be negative. At the time we were involved his attorney was telling him to plead guilty. We fired the attorney... When you say *Council on American-Islamic Relations* in DC, they pay more attention, a little bit more... They said 'we didn't think it would go that far.'

### **Victimhood and Citizenship**

On July 15, 2003, CAIR held a press conference for the release of its 2003 Civil Rights Report, "Guilty by Association." Journalists from the Associated Press, CNN, C-Span and many others were present. There were four speakers. Ibrahim Hooper made the introduction and Nihad Awad gave a brief speech. He said that old violations of rights were coming from persons and were due to ignorance and bias. But new violations are the result of government policies. When the government is the problem, the government has to be the solution. Civil rights are central to our lives, he said, "But this administration let down the community." He added that civil rights cannot be sacrificed for security. The Muslim community must defend its rights by being more politically involved. After Awad's speech, CAIR's research director presented his statistics on the rise in violations of the rights of Muslims across the country. He also mentioned nine successful hate-crime prosecutions. The fourth speaker at the press conference was a Muslim woman, Aysha Nadrat Yunes, who was a victim of civil rights violation. Federal agents broke into her house. She was handcuffed and forced to remove her headscarf. Then they took her picture. She said "I chose to become a citizen of the USA for liberties. I voted for President Bush."

9/11 generated a polarized response from Muslims in the U.S.. They either withdrew from a visible Muslim identity or decided to reclaim it through mobilization

and participation. Some of those who took the first track chose to disappear into the larger society by renouncing their Arab, Pakistani or even Muslim identities. Some chose to dissociate themselves from the community to avoid risks that might be caused by other members. Some have even changed their names to avoid discrimination in employment and other interactions with rest of the society. In short, a significant segment of the American Muslim community has been culturally and psychologically inhibited.

The alternate trajectory—the one the majority of American Muslims are in the process of taking—is to fight back for equality and legitimacy. The search for ways of expressing and facilitating an American Muslim identity has resulted in an increasing emphasis on advocacy work. In this climate, organizations like CAIR attract a great deal of interest and support from the community.

Some members of CAIR's staff are direct victims of post-9/11 civil rights violations. Laurie, for example, told me that she used to be a high school teacher. She decided to work for CAIR after her house in Virginia was raided in 2002 by federal agents. (Her husband is an Arab Muslim).

When our house was raided... it was March 2002. That was the day when I decided that I needed to come and work for CAIR full time. You know, it was shocking that this kind of thing could happen. Even though you read about it here and there, when it actually happens to you then you get out and talking about the issue and you start hearing other people's stories and they are devastating, I mean really. To see what people were going through. And you know then I decided I would. I called Ibrahim back in April and you know I said if you have any opening I am interested. And we talked and I ended up in the civil rights department.

Victims of civil rights violations tend to become active citizens with an enhanced appreciation for the values surrounding civil and human rights. In a sense, as victims Muslims become sensitized to civil rights work. Of course this does not happen

automatically. If an immigrant who lacks cultural means of expressing himself and finding his way around events is victimized, his victimization may not translate into activism and participation. Furthermore, the link between victimhood and active citizenship holds true only for those who are fully protected by the law.

### **CAIR and the American Muslim Public Sphere**

There are two historical moments in the formation of a national Muslim public sphere in the U.S. They are the founding of the Muslim Student Association in 1963, (which marks the diasporic moment), and the launch of the CAIR-NET email list in 1996 (the post-diasporic moment). For a religious minority dispersed across the country, collective spaces of interaction and spheres of representation are crucial for the development of codes and standards that define the group. This is particularly important in the case of American Muslims, who are divided along many lines. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims receive emails from CAIR on a daily basis. In each dispatch, one typically sees news about Muslims across the country and about CAIR's activities and "Action Alerts" calling on Muslim citizens to react to a particular incident. The reaction requested can be positive or negative, it often takes the form of asking subscribers to write to public officials commending or criticizing them for some recent action or statement. Muslims also learn about the media coverage of Muslim communities across the country through these emails.

Occasionally you'll hear Muslims say, "You're on the CAIR list, right?" (Much as a certain group of liberal, educated Americans is apt to say, "Did you hear the other day on NPR...?") Through this email list Muslim Americans learn about goings-on in

Muslim communities across the country. In an interesting way, CAIR's email list has become an internal clock, an agenda-setting device. It is not that Muslims are told what to do, except in Action Alerts, but they are exposed to stories about Muslims in other parts of the country that they probably wouldn't hear about otherwise. These are not always stories about hate crimes. They can be about a lawsuit won by a Muslim employee or an award won by a Muslim high school student. In Ramadan the list fills up with stories from what feels like every small-town newspaper in the country, all titled "Local Muslims Share Fast-breaking Meal with Non-Muslim Neighbors." In short, CAIR-NET has created a virtual American Muslim public sphere within which the triumphs, fears, and hopes of the community are propagated. It also appears to be a popular source of material for Friday sermons. The list, moreover, has contributed to CAIR's image in the minds of American Muslims by giving it relevance and continuity. CAIR's pan-Muslim advocacy work also places it above the Shia/Sunni divide. As such it has become an important avenue for articulating a common Muslim identity in the U.S. One can observe this characteristic of CAIR in the successful outreach of its Michigan chapter. Executive director of Michigan chapter, Dawud Walid, has been devoting a great deal of work to overcoming the sectarian differences, especially when it comes to issues of civil rights and communal solidarity.

### **Crises and Citizenship Capital**

If at the individual level, being victimized leads to greater participation in the struggle for civil rights and internalization of the values associated with it, being victimized generates a different kind of benefit at the collective level: citizenship capital.

Crises open space for displays of Muslim identity, allow Muslim leaders access to network television, and force government to recognize Muslims as a particular American community. It is almost surprising now to remember that President George W. Bush has indeed said positive things about Islam. Immediately after 9/11 he visited the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. After meeting with the Muslim leaders, including CAIR representatives, President Bush said that “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace.” (“A Decade of Growth,” CAIR Tenth Anniversary Report 1994-2004).

Every crisis that involved Muslims placed CAIR in the position of interlocutor with both the government and the media. Every crisis has inadvertently made CAIR into a partner for coalition building and public recognition, and a source of information on the Muslim community. Let us consider some of these crises and CAIR’s response to them.

On April 30, 2005, *Newsweek* published a piece by Michael Isikoff claiming that interrogators at Guantanamo had flushed a Qur’an down the toilet in an effort to demoralize the prisoners. *Newsweek* later retracted the story because its main source, a government employee, changed his story. But subsequent Pentagon investigation turned up several instances of Qur’an “mishandling.”

The report triggered anti-American riots at various places in the Muslim world, most notably in Pakistan and Afghanistan in May of 2005. On May 11, CAIR issued a statement urging President Bush “to initiate an open probe of the incident, make public its findings and punish those responsible.” The following weekend, CAIR sponsored a conference on “Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism.” On May 18, CAIR issued another press release, urging members to call their Representatives in support of a House

Resolution authored by Rep. John Conyers of Michigan, recognizing “that the Qur’an as any other holy book of any religion should be treated with dignity and respect.”

In response to this crisis, CAIR launched its “Explore the Qur’an” campaign. Posters and brochures were printed and ads placed in various media outlets, offering copies of the Qur’an to anyone who requested one. In the meantime, CAIR initiated a major fundraising campaign, asking its members to support the production and distribution of the holy books. Thousands of copies of the Qur’an were sent to interested citizens. Later, when the controversy over the Danish cartoons escalated into a full blown crisis, CAIR launched another campaign: “Explore the Life of Prophet Muhammad.” Among the distributed material were Karen Armstrong’s influential book on the Prophet Muhammad and a DVD of a recent PBS documentary by an American Convert, Michael Wolfe, *Muhammad: The Legacy of A Prophet* (2002).

On a similar front, in response to the growing interest in Islam after 9/11, CAIR launched The Library Project (“Bring Islam to Your Library”). The aim was to send a package of books and audio-visual material to every public library in the country. The package included 18 items, ranging from the PBS documentary “Islam: Empire of Faith” to the “Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam.” The project was intended to reach out to more than 16,000 public libraries in the U.S. CAIR’s library project is one of its few purely “proactive” projects. CAIR generally responds to events and crises, although the organization has become more inclined to proactive work since 9/11.

In each of these crises, CAIR increased its publicity, taking them as opportunities to inform the wider public about various aspects of Islam (the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic perspectives on torture etc). At the same time, CAIR called on

government institutions to acknowledge and recognize the rights of Muslims. CAIR's various "civil rights" work includes frequent media appearances, collection of data on cases of discrimination against Muslim citizens, coalition building and lobbying.

**"We did not reinvent the wheel"**

The Muslim encounter with American civil rights discourse is relatively new but it is evolving fast. Muslims began to appreciate the civic contributions of earlier generations of mistreated communities. Nihad Awad told me that when they first started they got a welcoming message from the Anti-Defamation League. "We expressed our willingness to work together on issues of common interest" he said, but noted that not much has developed out of this initial contact. Awad also said,

We used the experiences of other groups and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Today, Muslims are at the forefront of defense of civil rights. We've built coalitions with different civic groups. We need to fill in the information gap between Muslims and non-Muslims. The system in this country works for all. Muslims are learning how to communicate and work with the system.

In 2005 CAIR named a scholarship after Rosa Parks. The award is offered to students who are studying in fields that promote civil rights, social justice and conflict resolution. Muslims increasingly draw on the legacy and experience of African-American, Jewish and other communities. In May 2008, a group of Muslims in Los Angeles joined the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Manzanar Pilgrimage in recognition and remembrance of the suffering of Japanese-Americans who were put in internment camps. CAIR-LA executive director Hussam Ayloush told those gathered at the event:

We know now what it feels like when people look at you with suspicion, or treat you like you are a second-class citizen. Our presence here today isn't meant to suggest Arab-Americans are facing the threat and the loss of freedom of those

Manzanar internees, but we want to stand with our Japanese-American citizens wishing to ensure this could never happen again. Like them, we want to remember the past and to learn from it.

Muslims today not only learn from earlier cohorts of the civil rights movement, they also help newer cohorts learn from them. Nihad Awad once told me that “people are learning from CAIR’s experience from New Zealand, Germany, Australia. We are a model to be emulated around the world.” American Muslim organizations like CAIR have started to offer help and mediation to other (Muslim) minority communities in Europe and elsewhere. And it is not only Muslims who are learning from CAIR. “After 9/11,” Awad told me, “Sikhs started to get organized and CAIR helped them. Their organization is called SMART.”

### **“Know Your Rights”**

What if the FBI comes to visit you at your home or at your workplace, what can you do, what are your rights? We have seen cases where the FBI has come to Muslim homes. The man’s gone to work. They know, they know the schedule of the person they are going to see. They wait for the man to go to work. They come to the home, knowing there will be only the wife. They knock on the door. They say we are the FBI, can we ask some questions. Normally they are smart enough to bring with them a woman officer because they know that a woman would not just let them in. They know the community. So they come with a male officer and a female officer. And then she does not know her rights. So she is scared. She opens the door. So they start asking questions about, “your husband’s trip to Pakistan and your son went to Karachi this and that. You don’t mind if we take a look at your books, etc.” The woman or even the husband doesn’t know their rights. If the FBI comes to speak to you, you have the legal right not to say anything to them. One word. Irrespective if they are accusing you of something or they are asking you about someone else. You can respectfully say, “I don’t mind speaking with you but I would like to do that in the presence of a lawyer. This should be the response. Even if you have nothing to hide... Most people don’t know their rights, so they take advantage...



Muslims in the United States have lately become students of civil rights. This thought crossed my mind as I listened to a lecture at the Ann Arbor mosque on August 24, 2007. The program was titled, "Knowing Your Rights;" the speaker was Dawud Walid, the local representative of CAIR. He had a lot of issues to cover that night: the crackdown on Muslim charities and the rights pertaining to charitable donations; new regulations made by the transportation department with respect to traveling; citizenship delays; employment related rights; body search procedures for female travelers, and so on. The audience was large and lively. Afterwards they peppered the speaker with anxious questions about airport experiences, awkward encounters at their children's schools, and obnoxious comments in the local media. Such lectures are common these days at mosques around the country. Through these presentations Muslims, most of them immigrants, learn about the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the experience of Japanese-Americans who were put in internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the laws pertaining to religious expression in public schools, and the cultural codes of how to act if you're pulled over by the cops. CAIR is one of the institutions that plays a key role in this learning process. In this process African American Muslims often share their knowledge with the immigrants. That evening at the end of the lecture, those in attendance were given a tiny laminated booklet called the *American Muslim Civic Pocket Guide: Your Rights and Responsibilities as an American Muslim*. In miniscule type, the accordion-folded page covers a surprising amount of citizenship know-how: sections include "Writing a Letter to the Editor," "Communicating with Congress," "Your Legal Rights as an Employee," "Your Legal Rights as a Student," "Reacting to Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes," and several more. Yet teaching the Muslim community its civil rights is only

half of what CAIR does. The other half is to sensitize corporate/legal structures (i.e., private and public institutions) to Islam and Muslims.


CAIR offers a variety of publications addressing the needs of Muslims and the public at large. Those publications include practical handbooks such as the *Pocket Guide*, *The U.S. Congress Handbook*, *An Employer's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices*, *Law Enforcement Official's Guide to the Muslim Community*, *A Correctional Institution's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices*, *An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices*, *A Health Care Provider's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices*, *Muslim Community Safety Kit*, *Ramadan Publicity Guide*, *Hajj/Eid Publicity Guide*, and *Voter Registration Guide*.

### **The “Islam in America” Ad Campaign**

CAIR's role with respect to private and public corporations and government is symmetrical with its role in the Muslim community. CAIR teaches each side the necessity of the other in the language it understands. In 2003, CAIR launched an expensive ad campaign called *Islam in America*. Published in the *New York Times*, these ads depicted American Muslims as normal, regular citizens with mainstream American values (see Figure 5.1.). Although CAIR could not keep up the campaign for long due to financial constraints, the ads were later made available for local use by Muslim communities. The common message of the ads is the normality of being both Muslim and American. One of the ads is entitled, “I'm an American and I'm a Muslim.” It provides a good example of how the profile of a Muslim professional woman can be presented as the perfect embodiment of the compatibility between American and Muslim identities.

(Other ads in the series featured an image of a Muslim Girl Scout Troop from Santa Clara, CA, and a profile of a Muslim American family of Puerto Rican descent.)

**WE'RE ALL AMERICANS...**



**BUT, WHICH ONE OF US IS A MUSLIM?**

We all are...we're American Muslims. It's impossible to make general assumptions about Muslims because we represent more than one billion people from a vast range of races, nationalities and cultures – from the South Pacific to the Horn of Africa. Only about 18 percent of Muslims live in the Arabic-speaking world. The largest Muslim community is in Indonesia. Substantial parts of Asia and most of Africa have Muslim majority populations, while significant minorities are to be found in the countries of the former Soviet Union, China, North and South America, and Europe.


American Muslims are an equally diverse group of people. We're immigrants from across the globe who came here seeking freedom and opportunity. We're the children of immigrant parents, and descendants of Africans who have called America home for generations. We're converts of varied nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. We're doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, civil rights activists, mothers, fathers, students...making our homes and raising our families in communities across America.

What we all have in common is a shared faith and a shared commitment to our nation's safety and prosperity. We're Americans and we're Muslims.

**WE'RE AMERICAN MUSLIMS**

**CAIR**  
COUNCIL ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS

Number one of fifty-two in the Islam in America series. To learn more about the series, visit [www.americanmuslims.info](http://www.americanmuslims.info)



**I'M AN AMERICAN AND I'M A MUSLIM**

**MY NAME IS DR. J. AISHA SIMON.** I attended the Medical College of Virginia, completed my residency at Georgetown University and I'll be attending Harvard University to earn a master's degree in public health. I'm a family physician, a wife and a mother. I'm also involved in international relief work, traveling to places like Bosnia and Africa, and coordinating medical volunteers to serve in Guatemala. I was previously a regional coordinator for an anti-tobacco education campaign for elementary school children and I've served as an advocate for domestic violence survivors.

I'm an American Muslim woman and I believe in the importance of charity and service to my community.

The values I learned from my family and my religion while growing up in America have led me to a life of service. Islam calls upon us to strive with one another in hastening to good deeds, and to care for the less fortunate as we care for ourselves. The Prophet Muhammad taught us that when we serve our brother or sister, we are serving God.

**I'M AN AMERICAN MUSLIM**

**CAIR**  
COUNCIL ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS

Number six of fifty-two in the Islam in America series. To learn more about the series, visit [www.americanmuslims.info](http://www.americanmuslims.info)

Figure 5.1. CAIR's "Islam in America" ad campaign.

**I'M AN AMERICAN and I'M A MUSLIM**

My name is Dr. Aisha Simon. I attended the Medical College of Virginia, completed my residency at Georgetown University and I'll be attending Harvard University to earn a master's degree in public health. I'm a family physician, a wife and a mother. I'm also involved in international relief work, traveling to places like Bosnia and Africa, and coordinating medical volunteers to serve in Guatemala. I was previously a regional coordinator for an anti-tobacco education campaign for elementary school children and I've served as an advocate for domestic violence survivors.

I'm an American Muslim woman and I believe in the importance of charity and service to my community.

The values I learned from my family and my religion while growing up in America have led me to a life of service. Islam calls upon us to strive with one another in hastening to good deeds, and to care for the less fortunate as we care for ourselves. The Prophet Muhammad taught us that when we serve our brother and sister, we are serving God.

**I'M AN AMERICAN MUSLIM**  
**CAIR**

According to CAIR the campaign was “designed to foster greater understanding of Islam and to counter a rising tide of anti-Muslim rhetoric.” One of the ads starts with a question: “We are all Americans... But which One of Us is a Muslim?” The ad features pictures of three people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds— a white man, an African American schoolgirl, and an East Asian young man. Their warm smiles are accompanied by a text explaining the ethnic composition of Muslims in the U.S. (and of course the answer is that they’re all Muslim).

### **Digression: An Anecdote from the Field**

It is my last night in Washington DC. My flight back to Michigan is the next day. A box of field material including books, documents and other heavy stuff needs to be shipped back, but I am not able to take them with me due to limitations on the number of bags I can check in. One alternative is to have it sent through the publications department at the office. So I drive all the way from Fairfax to downtown DC, where my office— and research site— is located. It is very quiet. It is two blocks to Capitol Hill, after all, and you can hardly see anybody there at night. I unload the box from the car and make sure that the address sticker is well stuck. I have already asked Joseph in the publications department to ship it as soon as he can. My days in DC are over. The next day I fly back to Michigan. The material I collected while in Washington arrives a week later. The news from the field, however, just keeps coming. Several weeks later, I am startled to read on the CAIR email list (in a story reprinted from the *Charlotte Observer* titled “Ballenger grouses about Muslims”):

U.S. Rep. Cass Ballenger blames the breakup of his 50-year marriage partly on the stress of living near a leading American Muslim advocacy group that he and his wife worried was so close to the U.S. Capitol that “they could blow the place up.” ... Ballenger, a Republican from Hickory, called the Council on American-Islamic Relations — whose headquarters are across the street from his Capitol Hill home— a “fund-raising arm” for terrorist groups and said he reported CAIR to the FBI and CIA.

The nine term Republican made those comments during an interview discussing his legal separation from his wife, Donna. He told the reporter that the couple’s proximity to CAIR after September 11 “bugged the hell” out of his wife.

“Diagonally across from my house, up goes a sign— CAIR... the fund-raising arm for Hezbollah,” said Ballenger, 76, referring to a Lebanese militia group the United States has labeled a terrorist organization. “I reported them to the FBI and CIA.” Ballenger said in the post 9-11 environment in Washington, his wife, a homemaker, was anxious about all the activity at CAIR, including people unloading boxes and women “wearing hoods,” or headscarves, going in and out of the office building on New Jersey Avenue. “That’s 2 ½ blocks from the Capitol,” he added, “and they could blow it up.”

I was amused by Mr. Ballenger’s comments but CAIR handled it differently. Reading Ibrahim Hooper’s press release made me feel a bit less guilty: “Unloading boxes is no crime.” In response to Ballenger’s statements, CAIR filed a defamation lawsuit against the North Carolina congressman and called on national Republican leaders to repudiate his bigoted statements.

## **Conclusion**

A major implication of the story of CAIR is that Muslim interaction with law and legal structure has taken on a new density. Despite the fact that the cause of that interaction is, for the most part, negative, the mere fact of being close and dealing with

the law has had a transformative impact on both Muslims (by pushing them towards the discovery and exercise of their own rights) and the legal and administrative institutions (by pushing them towards recognition and accommodation of Muslim needs and sensibilities).

The struggle for civil rights is nonetheless only one avenue of securing one's membership in society. While full legal citizens, Muslims in the United States have found themselves suffering from some degree of alienage and alienation. Their legally intact citizenship can be seen as insufficient or accidental and their membership in American society suspect. Here the role played by CAIR is crucial. With its rational, legal plea for inclusion, it invites both violators of Muslim rights and uninformed Muslims to recognize and honor the nation's rules. By bringing cases to the public they strengthen the social fabric against future violations. The institution of citizenship is a process that needs to be maintained through practices and right-claims by the members of a given society.

CAIR plays two very important roles: On the one hand it unifies the Muslim community around discourses of victimhood and solidarity. Thus it gives rise to a pan-Muslim, non-sectarian, civic Muslim identity. It seeks to turn crises to the community's advantage. On the other hand, CAIR sensitizes the government, the law and the corporate culture to the existence and rights of Muslims. 9/11 has given CAIR the necessary publicity, raw material and community support to accomplish this mediating role. Institutions like CAIR facilitate the progression of Muslims in America from legal-yet-strange to legal-and-recognized, from "strangers among us" to "one of us."

## CHAPTER 6

### Seeking Kinship through Abraham: Muslim Interfaith Activism

#### Introduction

I found myself in the most ecumenical environment I had ever seen in my life when I walked into Christ Church in Cranbrook, a big church located in a northern suburb of Detroit. The event was the World Sabbath of Reconciliation, also known as the “Sixth Annual Interfaith Holy Day of Peace among the Religions of the World.” The evening was a mix of music, dance, and ritual. After seven “calls to prayer” by Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Native American and Hindu representatives, a rabbi, two pastors, and an imam were scheduled to give brief speeches. Though on the program, Imam Hassan Qazwini of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn was not back from hajj and therefore was represented by his spokesman, Eide Alawan. The talks were very general— all about love, peace, and tolerance. Eide Alawan, however, took the opportunity to invoke the tragedy of 9/11 and the difficulties Muslims faced. He spoke about his work on the interfaith coalition and then read a prayer written by Imam Qazwini about not blaming the innocent for the tragedy, coming together, taking hatred from our hearts and ignorance from our minds, and making our country a safe haven and

the earth an oasis of peace. He ended with “May God bless America,” repeated three times.

I noticed that Eide was the only one at the World Sabbath of Religious Reconciliation to specifically mention America. But he was not the only Muslim at the event. Two other Muslims were given “Peace Awards” for their contributions to interfaith dialogue: Imam Abdullah El-Amin of the Detroit Muslim Center, for his work in the production of the *Children of Abraham Project*, and Najah Bazy, a nurse who specializes in transcultural health care and is known for her social service and interfaith work. The evening ended with the participants signing a Call to Peace and the entire congregation joining together in prayer.

Ecumenical events like the World Sabbath are now quite common in the Metro Detroit area and across the country. There has been an explosion of such events since 9/11 and American Muslims are increasingly becoming visible on the ecumenical scene. They participate in interfaith dialogue as new partners, a process that started before 9/11 but took on a different quality after it. Contemporary Muslim vocabulary draws heavily on the shared origin of the three monotheistic religions and can be safely summarized as Abrahamic discourse. Interfaith dialogue constitutes a significant part of the work of Muslim citizenship in the post-9/11 era. In this chapter, I explore the background against which such activities are carried out, the actors involved in this work and the discourses they develop. I also ask why Muslims resort to Abrahamic discourse/language rather than liberal pluralism.

In order to explore the nature and meaning of interfaith activism for American Muslims, I talked to leading Muslim practitioners of interfaith work in the Metro Detroit



area. In the following pages, I first describe the kind of misconceptions that exclude Muslims and deny Islam a place in the American religious landscape. Next, I discuss in detail how Muslim activists re-construct Islam as an American religion through interfaith dialogue. Taking a close look at the profiles of interfaith workers, this section provides a detailed picture of Muslim involvement in Metro Detroit's local interfaith scene. The final section is a rethinking of interfaith work as a citizenship practice.

### **Islam as the Religion of the Enemy**

For many Muslim Americans the greatest damage caused by 9/11 is that it seriously undermined the legitimacy of their religion. They often note that 9/11 was an attack on both their country and their religion. Seen as the religion of the terrorists, Islam and its associated culture became a liability in public life. Even non-political, mundane concepts of the faith became subject to contestation and controversy. By way of illustration, let me describe three instances where the legitimacy of Islam as a faith has become an issue.

#### *Allah: An American God?*

One aspect of the 9/11 backlash has been an amplification of the belief that Muslims worship a god different from the God worshipped by Jews and Christians. In 2003, Lt. Gen. William Boykin, a deputy undersecretary of defense, made headlines by suggesting that Allah is “not a real God.” He told church audiences that he is in “the army of God” and claimed that Muslims worship an “idol” (*CNN*, October 17, 2003). Similar remarks have been frequently made by some evangelical Christian leaders. Pat Robertson

has on various occasions claimed that today's world conflicts concern “whether Hubal, the moon god of Mecca known as Allah, is supreme, or whether the Judeo-Christian Jehovah, God of the Bible, is supreme.”<sup>78</sup> Lt. General Boykin’s statements, in particular the moon god libel, belong to a genre of stereotypes that date back to medieval times. They depict Muhammad as a Christian schismatic and idolater. After his statements became public, General Boykin faced pressure from civil rights groups and the media. A *New York Times* editorial later called for him to be fired (*New York Times*, August 26, 2004). Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defense at the time, rejected all such calls.

Lt. General Boykin’s perception of Islam is clearly not shared by the majority of Americans. Nevertheless it reflects a growing tendency to see Islam negatively. According to a *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* survey, the number of Americans who believe their own religion to have a lot in common with Islam is declining. 22% believed so in 2003, as compared with 27% in 2002, and 31% shortly after 9/11. The same survey also revealed that in 2003 44% of Americans believed Islam encourages violence.

Even though the idea that Muslims worship an idol is clearly wrong, Muslims suffer the consequences of such statements. In January 2007, the old mosque complex of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn was vandalized. The perpetrators spray-painted hateful graffiti on the front of the mosque: “You Idol Worship(pers), Go Home 911 Murderers” (Figure 6.1). The Islamic Center of America is one of the oldest mosques still active in the metro Detroit area. Ironically, members of this mosque are among the earliest Muslim immigrants, some of them third generation Americans, and it is an

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<sup>78</sup> Along the same lines, conservative talk radio hosts have echoed Ann Coulter’s call to “invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.”

institution that champions dialogue with other faith groups. (A more detailed description of the mosque and its community comes later in this chapter).



Figure 6.1. Hate graffiti painted on the front of the old Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan.

Boykin’s remarks, nevertheless, caused both journalists and Muslim community leaders to discuss whether the word “God” should take the place of “Allah.” Journalist John Kearney, for example, wrote in an op-ed in the *New York Times* that “when journalists write about Muslims, or translate from Arabic, Urdu, Farsi or other languages, they should translate ‘Allah’ as ‘God’.” He noted that those who think otherwise “might be surprised that Christian Arabs use “Allah” for God, as do Arabic-speaking Jews. In Aramaic, the language of Jesus, God is “Allaha,” just a syllable away from Allah.” Kearney concluded his piece with a suggestion for the media:

Of course, there are distinctions to be made between religions, which the press shouldn't shy away from. But there is no need to augment these differences artificially, especially at the cost of an accurate understanding of the origins of the Abrahamic faiths (John Kearney, "My God is Your God", *New York Times*, January 28, 2004).

Umar Faruq Abdallah, a convert Muslim intellectual and director of the Chicago-based *Nawawi Foundation* published an article that tackled the same question (Abdallah 2004). He observed that it is not only non-Muslims who insist that Allah is not God, but some Muslims also insist on the exclusive use of Allah.<sup>79</sup> In "One God, Many Names," Abdallah wrote:

The fact that Allah and the Biblical God are identical is evident from Biblical etymology. From the standpoint of Islamic theology and salvation history, it is simply unacceptable to deem the Biblical God and that of the Qur'an to be anything but the same, despite the fact that, in recent years, many English-speaking Muslims have developed an ill-advised convention of avoiding the word "God" under the mistaken assumption that only the Arabic word "Allah" carries a linguistic guarantee of theological authenticity."

After a detailed discussion of Biblical and Islamic sources on different names of one God and the need for Muslims to use the same word, Abdallah concludes his paper with the following remarks:

Use of "God" emphasizes the extensive middle ground we share with other Abrahamic and universal traditions and provides a simple and cogent means by which Muslims may act upon the Qur'anic injunction to stress the similarities between us. Failure to use "God" conceals our common belief in the God of Abraham and the continuity of the Abrahamic tradition, which are fundamentals of our faith. We must overcome our misgivings about "God" both because of the word's intrinsic, historical merit and because it empowers us to communicate with

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<sup>79</sup> Muslims themselves are increasingly becoming aware of negative consequences of the confusion over the equivalence between Allah and God. Community leaders frequently lecture on how to present the community to the larger public. At a recent event (February 23, 2008) with the theme "Presenting Islam to Fellow Americans" at the Islamic Center of America (co-organized by CAIR-Michigan and the Young Muslim Association, the youth organization of ICA), Dawud Walid recommended that his audience "keep Islamic nomenclature to the bare minimum. Don't use too many Islamic terms. Say God instead of Allah..."

our Jewish and Christian, and other English-speaking neighbors in a meaningful way (Abdallah 2004: 8).

*“My American Jihad”*

The second controversy<sup>80</sup> involves a commencement speech. Zayed Yasin, 22, was one of the three students who made the commencement speech at Harvard University on June 6, 2002. When the title of his speech, “American Jihad,” appeared on the list of speakers in *The Harvard Crimson* a group of students started a protest against him. They asked for an explicit condemnation of violent *jihad*. A petition signed by his fellow students asked the university administration to withdraw his speech. He received hate e-mails and a death threat. In the meantime, experts and community leaders discussed the meaning of *jihad*. The controversy soon spilled over into the national papers and wire services. Under tremendous pressure from his critics and parts of the university administration, Zayed Yasin agreed to change the title of his speech from “American Jihad” to “Of Faith and Citizenship” with the subtitle “My American Jihad.” He also agreed to make references to the September 11 terrorist attacks. He told a reporter: “I am confronted with the assumption that because of my name I came from some other country, that I’m a foreign student, that I’m not American...” (“War of Words,” *ABC News*, June 5, 2002).

When I talked to him over the phone on August 22, 2003, he described the attempts to depict him as un-American as a “dishonest abuse of patriotism.” When he eventually made his speech, he started with a discussion of his personal experience as a Muslim and as an American.

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<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere (Bilici 2005) I engage in a more detailed discussion of this controversy and the competing uses of “American Jihad.”

I am one of you, but I am also one of “them.” What do I mean? When I am told that this is a world at war, a war between the great civilizations and religions of the earth, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. “What about me?” I ask. As a practicing Muslim and a registered voter in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, am I, through the combination of my faith and my citizenship, an inherent contradiction? I think not. Both the Qur’an and the Constitution teach ideals of peace, justice and compassion, ideals that command my love, and my belief. Each of these texts, one the heart of my religion the other that of my country, demand a constant struggle to do what is right (Yasin 2002).

After affirming the compatibility between American identity and Muslim identity—or as he puts it, between his faith and his citizenship—Yasin discusses the meaning of *jihad* in an attempt to draw attention to what he sees as jihad’s primary meaning.

I choose the word "struggle" very deliberately, for its connotations of turmoil and tribulation, both internal and external. The word for struggle in Arabic, in the language of my faith, is jihad. It is a word that has been corrupted and misinterpreted, both by those who do and do not claim to be Muslims, and we saw last fall, to our great national and personal loss, the results of this corruption. Jihad, in its truest and purest form, the form to which all Muslims aspire, is the determination to do right, to do justice even against your own interests. It is an individual struggle for personal moral behavior. Especially today, it is a struggle that exists on many levels: self-purification and awareness, public service and social justice... So where is our jihad, where is our struggle as we move on from Harvard's sheltering walls?

By raising the alternative meanings of the concept of *jihad*, Yasin not only makes the concept familiar for non-Muslims but also translates it into universal terms. *Jihad* as determination to do right, to do justice and as an individual struggle for personal, moral behavior is something that any American citizen would support. “My opponents tried to separate me from America. I wanted to give the opposite message: the harmony of values,” he said to me over the phone. He also concluded his speech by linking jihad and the American dream:

The true American Dream is a universal dream, and it is more than a set of materialistic aspirations. It is the power and opportunity to shape one's own life: to house and feed a family, with security and dignity, and to practice your faith in peace. This is our American Struggle, our American Jihad. As a Muslim, and as an American, I am commanded to stand up for the protection of life and liberty, to serve the poor and the weak, to celebrate the diversity of humankind. There is no contradiction. Not for me, and not for anyone, of any combination of faith, culture and nationality, who believes in a community of the human spirit.

### *Authenticating the Qur'an as an American Scripture*

A similar controversy broke out in late 2006 when Rep. Keith Ellison of Minnesota, the first Muslim elected to Congress, stated his intention to take the oath on the Qur'an instead of the Bible. In fact the Qur'an was only to be used for a photo-op reenactment of the swearing-in ceremony. The official ceremony, where all newly elected members take the oath, is done collectively and without any books, but individual members are allowed to use their holy books later in reenactments. When a conservative columnist, Dennis Prager, attacked Ellison in an article where he said, "Ellison has announced that he will not take his oath of office on the Bible, but on the bible of Islam, the Koran. He should not be allowed to do so—not because of any American hostility to the Koran, but because the act undermines American civilization" (Dennis Prager, "America, not Keith Ellison, decides what book a congressman takes his oath on," *Townhall Magazine*, November 28, 2006). A congressman from Virginia, Rep. Virgil Goode, also called Ellison's plan to use the Qur'an "a threat to the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America" and added that "if American citizens don't wake up and adopt the Virgil Goode position on immigration there will likely be many more Muslims elected to office and demanding the use of the Koran" (CNN, January 4,

2007). Such statements drew criticism from organizations including CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations) and the ADL (Anti-Defamation League).

One of the first things Ellison did on the House floor was to shake Goode's hand and ask him out for a cup of coffee. He told CNN that "by reaching out to Congressman Goode I'm not trying to be accepted, I'm trying to build bridges... In this world there are too many misunderstandings. I want to put a human face on things" (CNN, January 4, 2007).

Eventually, Keith Ellison took the official oath along with the other incoming members of the House. In the ceremonial photo-op he used a copy of the Qur'an that was once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's copy of the Qur'an is a two-volume English translation which Ellison borrowed from the rare books division of the Library of Congress. As suggested in a piece in *The Washington Post*, the holy book Ellison used had "an unassailably all-American provenance" ("But It's Thomas Jefferson's Koran," *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2007). By using Jefferson's Qur'an, which has Jefferson's handwritten initials and notes in the margins, Ellison authenticated the Qur'an as a legitimate American scripture.

The above discussion of the controversies around the words Allah and jihad and the Qur'an as a holy book illustrate the multiple ways in which the legitimacy of Islam as a faith is contested in post-9/11 America. A common Muslim response to the exclusion faced in such situations is to assert that the contested Islamic elements are legitimate. They do so by reformulating them as American. Muslims increasingly prefer the use of God over Allah; they re-define the stigmatized word "jihad" in relation to the ethos of the



American dream; and they frequently assert the compatibility of the Qur'an and the Constitution.

American Muslims today live in an age where the state has been colonized by the nation (Arendt 1973: 275). 9/11 triggered an eclipse of national identity and resurgence of nativism. To make itself part of the landscape of American religion, Islam must prove its loyalty to the nation. In the following section, I switch from examples of national controversies, which I believe are symptomatic of Muslim exclusion in the post-9/11 atmosphere, back to the efforts of local Muslim communities, whose representatives attempt to undo the exclusion through participation in the dialogue of faiths. What do Muslims do to make Islam an American religion?

### **Metro Detroit Area Muslims as Interfaith Partners**

There are more than 50 mosques or Muslim community spaces in the Metro Detroit area.<sup>81</sup> The ethnic identity of Arab Detroit has been extensively studied (Abraham and Shryock 2000). Not surprisingly, the city's emergent Muslim identity has gained greater attention after 9/11. I visited most of these mosques, some of them multiple times, some of them only once.<sup>82</sup> Most of these mosque communities engage in some sort of

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<sup>81</sup> The diversity of the Muslim community is bewildering. Muslims in the Detroit area are divided along ethnic, sectarian, racial and temporal lines. Some of these mosques are predominantly Iraqi, Lebanese, Yemeni, Bangladeshi, Bosnian, Albanian, Indo-Pakistani, African American, immigrant African. Some of them are well-established communities, while others are not-yet-settled, diasporic (e.g., the Senegalese Mourids). Some of them are proud to be American and display their pride through flags and critique of Muslim cultures overseas; others are too new to know whether they should be proud or how to show it. While immigrant mosques and imams authenticate themselves through the English language and American flags, some African-American mosques and imams authenticate themselves through conspicuous use of Arabic vocabulary and displays of green flags with crescent and star. Some of them are interested in interfaith activities, some not. Some can afford to do such work, others cannot.

<sup>82</sup> In some of my visits, I was with colleagues from the *Building Islam in Detroit Project*, a project initiated by Andrew Shryock and Sally Howell to document various aspects of Detroit mosque cultures. BIID

interfaith dialogue, since it has become hard to avoid such encounters. Even when Muslims may not be interested in participating in such activities, they have to respond to the demands coming from non-Muslim groups and individuals who seek to reach out to Muslims as a gesture of solidarity. This structural push towards such participation, however, in itself does not tell us much about how Muslims themselves feel about their involvement in the interfaith world. While the demand for and intensity of interfaith activities have risen dramatically, it is still the work of a few individuals. I have talked to these people and also observed them on multiple occasions as partners in interfaith events. Here are some of the most active Muslims in the ecumenical scene in Detroit area:

1. Eide Alawan (Islamic Center of America)
2. Najah Bazy (Islamic Center of America)
3. Victor Begg (the Muslim Unity Center)
4. Imam Abdullah El Amin (Muslim Center of Detroit)
5. Dawud Walid (CAIR-Michigan)
6. Imam Achmat Salie (the Muslim Unity Center).

While these six individuals do not exhaust the list of all Muslim interfaith activists, they are the most visible ones. They have also institutionalized their involvement in interfaith work to a certain degree. Their mosques provide the infrastructure for them to work as a network. For the sake of contextualization, I shall briefly describe these mosques. These mosques deserve to be highlighted because their engagement in interfaith activities often goes beyond brief neighborhood encounters.

**Islamic Center of America:** This mosque was mentioned earlier as a victim of vandalism and hate graffiti. It is one of the three oldest mosques still active in the area. The Islamic Center is a Shia mosque serving both third generation, well-established Lebanese and first generation Iraqi immigrants. Unlike most of the mosques in Detroit, the Islamic Center was built as a mosque and opened its doors in 1963. (Its history, however, goes back even further, since it was an offshoot of the Dix Mosque which was established in 1937). In 2005, the Islamic Center of America moved to its new mosque complex. Now one of the largest mosques in North America, the new building is located on Ford Road and includes a large auditorium, a social hall and offices and can accommodate thousands of believers. While the congregation includes many new immigrants from Iraq and other places, the founding generation of Lebanese still control the board. The Islamic Center also attracts some African Americans and white converts. The imam of the mosque, Sayyid Hassan Qazwini, also active in interfaith dialogue, gives his sermons in both Arabic and English. Most of the immigrant members of the congregation prefer Arabic, while some older and American-born members prefer English. Eide Alawan, who is part of the center's outreach committee, comes from a Lebanese-French family and does not speak Arabic. While he is a very visible face on interfaith scene, his profile seems to be an exception rather than typical for his congregation. Now in his late 60's, Eide is not satisfied with the level of Muslim participation in interfaith work: "Most of the time I try to get my community to participate in the same things that I'm doing so they see that I'm participating within the community as well as connecting to the outside community. But it's very difficult to get our Muslim community involved."

Another active member of the Islamic Center is Najah Bazy, a nurse who specializes in transcultural health care. In her late 40s, Najah is a third generation Arab American. She is a senior advisor to the Islamic Center's youth organization, the Young Muslim Association (YMA). A local celebrity, she makes many media appearances and frequently lectures about Islam to non-Muslim audiences. She wears hijab and does culturally sensitive nursing. She says it took some time and several crises— such as the Iranian revolution and 9/11— for people like her to re-think their ethnic and religious identity. During a lecture on a college campus on March 22, 2005, she told her audience that “when I decided to wear hijab, my family was opposed. My mother was against it. They wanted me to assimilate. But I did it.” She also points to a shift in her tripartite identity from “Arab-American-Muslim” to “Muslim-American-Arab.” She thinks that religion is an easier way of relating to American society than ethnicity, given the commonalities Islam has with the values of this society. Her involvement in interfaith activism bears the mark of her professional work. She wants to put interfaith dialogue and diversity to work in the social services and institutional settings such as hospitals.

**Muslim Center of Detroit:** Established in 1985, the Muslim Center is an inner city African American mosque that is part of Imam Warith Deen Muhammed's community. After the transition from Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam to orthodox Islam, the community's self identification has changed several times: it is currently called the Muslim American Society. Not far from the Muslim Center is Masjid Wali Muhammad, the main mosque that follows W.D. Muhammad's teachings more closely. While sharing a lot of history with Masjid Wali Muhammad, the Muslim Center is a more active and

diverse community. The Muslim center is located on Davison Avenue in Detroit and was converted to its current use from a former bank. It has recently been expanded. The chairman of the Muslim Center, Imam Abdullah El Amin, is an active leader on various fronts. In addition to his work at the Muslim Center, El Amin is one of the publishers of *The Muslim Observer*, a weekly Muslim newspaper based in Detroit but with a national readership. El Amin also runs a funeral home.

Imam Abdullah El Amin converted to Islam in the mid-1970's. He is now in his fifties. "I became Muslim about a year after Imam W.D. Muhammad came. I wasn't part of the Nation of Islam back with Elijah Muhammad and that group. I didn't take part in that, actually." Unlike its sister mosques that exclusively serve African Americans, the Muslim Center has a large immigrant African membership, mostly from West Africa. It is also not unusual to come across immigrant and European American Muslims during the Friday prayers. In many ways, the Muslim Center represents the middle point between indigenous African American mosques and immigrant ones. El Amin says "this mosque is universal. As a matter of fact, we were thinking about changing our name to the Universal Muslim Center." The Muslim Center has various social programs that also attract non-Muslims in the neighborhood. "The block association meets here. We have a group of Narcotics Anonymous that meets here... We have a soup kitchen where we feed the neighborhood around here every Saturday, and there's also a free clinic, a medical clinic that we have here."

Another prominent African American interfaith activist is Dawud Walid. He is currently the executive director of the Michigan chapter of CAIR. The youngest on my list of prominent interfaith activists, Dawud has the rare combination of interest in civil

rights and social justice issues and a cleric's knowledge of Islam. He used to be an assistant imam at Masjid Wali Muhammad. Dawud thus can easily claim both elements of authenticity. In his speeches he comfortably recites Qur'an and other religious sources in Arabic, while at the same time quoting leaders of the American civil rights movement. I have heard him speak on many occasions. He has increasingly become interested in Muslim intrafaith dialogue. The main theme of his campus lecture to members of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Michigan on February 2, 2006, was the notion of *ummah*. Dawud's speech emphasized the need to bridge the gaps between the African American and immigrant Muslim communities, as well as between the Sunni and Shia communities. He referred to a well-known occurrence at the time of Prophet Muhammad, when the prophet paired the indigenous people of Medina with newly-arrived immigrants from Mecca: the partners were to look out for one another's spiritual and material well-being, with the locals helping the newcomers to adjust to their new environment. Dawud went on to make the analogy that today's Muslims from the suburbs (immigrants) and Muslims in the inner city (African American) should pair up and engage in closer dialogue. He concluded by underlining the post-9/11 reality that "we should realize that we are all in the same boat. We either sink together or swim together."

**Muslim Unity Center:** The Unity Center was founded by Victor Begg in 1993 in Bloomfield Hills, an affluent suburb in the north of Detroit. Begg is originally from India and has been living in Detroit for decades. A successful businessman who used to attend services at the predominantly Indo-Pakistani IAGD (Islamic Association of Greater Detroit), he became dissatisfied and decided to start a mosque that was non-ethnic and

non-sectarian. Together with other Muslims, he decided to buy a school building and expand it into an Islamic center. When they purchased the building from the Pontiac School District, they faced opposition from the neighbors. After much furor and media attention, they managed to convince the neighbors “that they were not terrorists.” Among those who supported their case at the court hearing were Christian and Jewish clergy. Speaking at the Interfaith Symposium at Wayne State University on April 15, 2006, Begg recalled this experience in speaking about how far they have come as an interfaith community:

Back in 1993 we wanted to have a mosque in Bloomfield Hills. We bought the school property. As you know, the neighbors thought “terrorists are moving in” ... and we did a pretty good job working with the city and school district but forgot the neighbors. So we had problems... Back then many neighbors thought that we are some kind of Satan worshippers.

Victor Begg’s dream of having an ecumenical mosque that would reach out not only to different Muslims but also to non-Muslims is today a reality. The Unity Center serves more than two hundred fifty families. Its inclusivity is reflected in the sermons, which always strike me as unusually ecumenical. The congregation is mostly affluent and professional. Ethnically diverse and open to all schools of thought, the Unity Center has also become a hub of interfaith work. The signs of this conscious engagement with faith groups in the larger society are everywhere to be seen. The official description of the center says it all:

Established in 1993 as a center open to the ethnically diverse Muslim community in the area, the Unity Center is a place where families and individuals from all backgrounds can feel comfortable praying, learning about Islam, and socializing. The center is also a place where non-Muslims are welcome and can come and learn about Muslims and Islam.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> In addition to the usual Sunday school and other religious courses, the center offers various recreational activities including women’s aerobic classes and a Ladies Badminton Club.

The Unity Center often celebrates its dual achievements of internal (pan-Muslim) ecumenism and external (interfaith) ecumenism. As visitors approach the entrance of the center, the first thing they see is a rock inscribed with a verse from the Qur'an. This verse is an explicit statement of Islam as an Abrahamic religion (Figure 6.2):

Say, "We have believed in God and in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims submitting to Him." - Qur'an, Al-Imran 84.

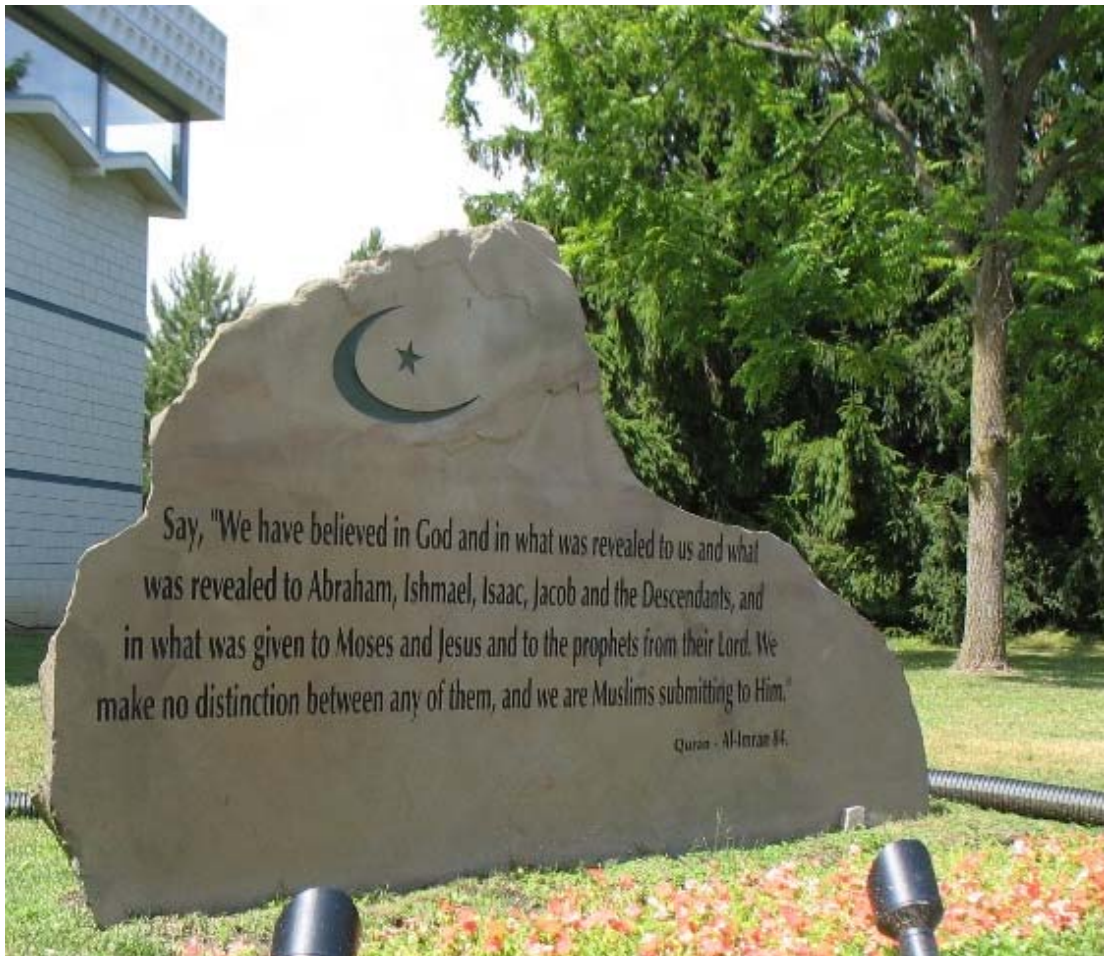


Figure 6.2. The text that greets visitors to the Muslim Unity Center, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.



The religious leaders of the Unity Center— both Imam Musa, the principal imam, and Imam Achmat Salie, who is affiliated with the center— are always strikingly broad minded. Availability of resources informs the roles that spiritual leaders of places like the Unity Center take. After Imam Salie left another mosque and joined the Unity Center, I observed something of a bifurcation in the orientation of the two imams. While Imam Salie, who is from South Africa and has both native mastery of English and greater familiarity with Christianity, focuses on outreach activities and often seems to speak in the jargon of New Age Christianity (self-actualization through spirituality), Imam Musa, who is an immigrant from Egypt and has a more authoritative knowledge of Islam but lacks comfort with the English language, has become more reserved. He is increasingly interested in the preservation of Muslim identity.

*Who becomes an Interfaith Worker?*

Although they are a small group, Muslim interfaith workers are very diverse. Of the six individuals, two are African American (Imam El Amin and Dawud Walid), one is a woman (Najah Bazy) and only two are professional clerics (El Amin and Achmat Salie). They are overwhelmingly American-born. Najah Bazy, for example, always tells audiences with pride that she is a third generation American. Only Victor Begg is an immigrant (he migrated in the 1960s) but he is the one with the largest financial resources and strongest social standing. They come from both upper middle class suburban communities and lower class inner-city communities. What they all have in common is American *cultural literacy*, which includes the English language and mass communication skills. They collectively respond to a demand for the presentation of

Islam to members of other faith groups. Andrew Shryock provides a fascinating discussion of the strategies of community representation in his discussion of the “double remoteness” of Arab Detroit (Shryock 2004).

In an article published on an Islamic website, an American Muslim community organizer, Altaf Hussain, asks whether Muslims are up to the challenge of interfaith dialogue (Hussain 2001). After discussing the various levels at which Muslims find themselves engaged in interfaith dialogue, he points to several challenges:

One of the major challenges we face as Muslims in such discussions is agreeing on a common language for communication. In America, our imams and representatives must be well versed in the English language --in terms of possessing both a solid grasp of the English vocabulary and an understanding of American idioms. Too often, we minimize this element, and push for people to represent Islam in such discussions who are non-native English speakers. Although they possess the Islamic knowledge, they often have a difficult time trying to explain fundamental Islamic beliefs in plain language using phrases and expressions common to Americans. What happens is the speakers end up confusing listeners, and leaving them with more questions afterwards than before the dialogue...

Adding that the ideal representative in an interfaith dialogue has to understand the religious perceptions of non-Muslims, Hussain points out the need for the Muslim community to develop standards for the uncharted area of interfaith encounters. For example, should Muslim clergy shake hands with the opposite sex? Which rituals of other faiths should they participate in within the framework of interfaith dialogue? When Jennifer Granholm, the governor of the state of Michigan, visited the old Islamic Center of America after her election in 2002, she stepped into one such gray area. Before the visit she was advised by her staff (and representatives of the Islamic Center) that she should not shake hands with men at the mosque. During the visit she was confused to find herself surrounded by the men of the congregation, all wanting to shake her hand.

Most Muslim communities have yet to fully articulate a language of interaction with the outside world. An important form of that interaction, interfaith dialogue, remains the domain of just a few individuals. As the public faces of their communities, these individuals mediate the images and information presented to the wider public. As Andrew Shryock points out, their task is similar to our task as ethnographers—except that theirs is performative, while we rely on writing. When Eide Alawan says that he feels more comfortable with Christians and Jews than Muslims, he partly reveals what he is usually expected to keep hidden: that some aspects of his community (especially the immigrant elements) embarrass him. Their “cultural intimacy” (Shryock 2004, Herzfeld 1997) instills in these individuals—whose tastes and life trajectories often diverge significantly from the communities they represent—both a fierce protectiveness and a certain degree of embarrassment. Meanwhile, people lacking cultural literacy (e.g., those who speak with an accent) are usually not put on display, even when they are more representative of the majority of a given community. Unlike the average members of their congregations, the public mediators are more Americanized and have the time and resources to devote to outreach activities.

*Interfaith Dialogue: Before and After 9/11*

Muslim involvement in interfaith dialogue certainly has a longer history, but all activists agree that 9/11 had a tremendous impact on their level of engagement. Some Muslim commentators describe the new era as “a silent revolution” (Takim 2004: 343). I asked Eide Alawan in 2005 about the impact of 9/11. He said,

Prior to September 11, it was more of a low-key situation. The occasional visitation, the occasional discussion. But after September 11, because of the

curiosity about Islam, really people wanted to know: is Islam a thing we should be fearful of? What is this religion? Although we've been here over 100 years in this country, 150 years. September 11 accelerated our interfaith work and it was a positive situation. Most Muslims will feel that it was a negative situation. It wasn't negative as far as I was concerned. There was a positive situation. The occurrence that happened was a bad thing, there's no question about it, but what developed from that was a positive situation. The Jewish community, the Christian community came in and said, "Look, we've got to do something. We've got to understand that these are people of faith just like us. We all come from the same stem." And this is how it all started to evolve. Victor Begg the very next day got together Jewish and Christian and Muslim friends and said, "We've got to do something. We can't just continue to hold hands, we have to dialogue. Instead of Christians just with Muslims and Christians just with Jews, we have to all three get together." And this has been occurring the last four or five years. It's non-stop.

Alawan's views on the impact of 9/11 are echoed by the experience of other interfaith workers. Najah Bazy, for example, observes that

before 9/11, I was pushing doors open for dialogue. After 9/11 doors were opening and I was walking in and that was the difference. 9/11 as well as tragedy the end result was that it gave many of us an opportunity to dialogue, to teach, to collaborate. Muslims were no longer forgotten at the table anymore.

She also comments on the increase in her appearances in the media and at public venues, where she assumes the role of a mediator who represents a legible image of Islam. She believes her gender makes her particularly fit for this role.

And in terms of post-9/11 I will tell you that I have spoken at more Christian pulpits than I have at Muslim mosques. So what that's allowed, it's allowed a visual, a female—which breaks the stereotypes—it allows a visual of a woman in hijab. It allows an auditory of a woman who is born and raised in this country, who really does not have an accent, so breaks that stereotype. And it allows the beauty of the faith to really flow. And to really talk about peace and justice and reconciliation and conflict resolution and all of those things that America is afraid to really believe about us. So it's trust, and humans need ambassadorship. And that's what I've really found post-9/11.

Activists like Najah Bazy think the importance of the work they do cannot be exaggerated as far as the recognition and integration of Muslims is concerned. Yet they usually have difficulty mobilizing more Muslims for the task. Muslim scholars such as Suleyman Nyang argue that interfaith work can very well be treated as an index of Muslim acculturation in America (Smith 2004: 167).

Most of the interfaith activities Muslims participate in are initiated by other faith groups, primarily Christians and Jews. As such, Muslims participate as “guests” while other faiths remain “hosts.” Muslims are increasingly recognizing the need to be involved in the dialogue on an equal basis as “hosts”. Therefore, one can observe that American Muslims have been undergoing a transition where their roles as participants of interfaith dialogue change from being guest to being co-hosts. Writing in the early 1980s, Muslim American thinker Ismail R. Al Faruqi recognized this problem in his *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, when he wrote “no dialogue can succeed where one party is ‘host’ and the others are ‘invited guests.’ Every party must be host and feel itself so” (Faruqi 1982: ii). Muslims who engage in sustained interfaith activism are not diasporic immigrant communities but rather post-diasporic individuals and communities.

Detroit area Muslims have been involved in organizations such as The National Conference for Community and Justice in Michigan. While before 9/11 Muslims were merely newly joined members in most of the interfaith organizations, since 9/11 they have begun to take part in the *creation* of new initiatives and organizations. Interfaith Partners is one such organization. A subgroup under the umbrella of NCCJ, it was formed on September 12, 2001. Interfaith Partners has been organizing annual interfaith symposiums since 9/11. I attended one on May 4, 2006, at Wayne State University where

a number of workshops were held. Among the interfaith work done under the umbrella of Interfaith Partners is something called the Children of Abraham Project.

*“We are all Children of Abraham”*

Interfaith encounters elevate one element of Muslim identity to a central position: the idea of Abraham as father of the three monotheistic religions. Muslims like Victor Begg often emphasize that the Judeo-Christian tradition is more accurately the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition because all three are children of Abraham, the first prophet to receive God’s revelation. They share an Abrahamic faith with a common belief in God, prophets, revelation, a divinely-mandated community, and moral responsibility. While Jews and Christians trace their lineage to Abraham through Isaac, Muslims do so through Ishmael.

Many Muslim activists, as well as non-Muslim partners in interfaith encounters, imagine themselves as members of a family who have been alienated and dispersed over time and geography. Interfaith dialogue is a sort of coming together, a family reunion. The Children of Abraham Project grew out of this thinking. The project organizes retreats where Jewish, Christian and Muslim students are brought together as a family to share their experiences. The project has also produced a play that bears the same title. Imam Abdullah El Amin, who first introduced the idea, said,

This started with an idea I shared over lunch with my friend Brenda Rosenberg. We were talking about all the problems in the world that involve Muslims and Jews and Christians. And I said, “If we would only remember that we all share the same father, Abraham, we might find ways to bring our family back together again.”

After this conversation, Rosenberg went home and had a dream. In her dream she saw Isaac and Ishmael on a stage. She decided to put this idea into the form of a play. The play, *Children of Abraham*, would be a family reunification, the coming together of Ishmael and Isaac. The concept is to bring together teenagers from all three faiths, ask them to share their life stories, weave those stories into a play, then plan a short workshop to be held after the play to give audiences a chance to join in the discussion. I saw the play at Henry Ford Center for Performing Arts on February 28, 2005. Imam Abdullah El Amin and Brenda Rosenberg got several community service awards and their play was featured in a CBS network special on religious reconciliation.

I was told by Muslims who participated in the production process that both Jewish and Muslim creators of the play had to make sacrifices to reach a common language acceptable to all parties. Describing how the process was emotionally difficult for them, Alawan said: “So this has been a family relationship. We don’t always get along. We argue, we disagree, we don’t talk to each other a couple of days at a time because we’re just upset, but this is no different than a family, we’re treating it as a family.” Alawan added that “these experiences basically go to show that families do differ, have disagreements, but they still can get along.” In such situations often the best equipped Muslims are convert Muslims who can navigate back and forth between the scriptures of the three faiths. The same dynamic that elevates the figure of Abraham to a central position also privileges convert Muslims in interfaith encounters. African American Muslims who were either themselves once Christian or have Christian relatives find it easier to relate to Christians in interfaith dialogue (Smith 2004: 181). Imam Abdullah El Amin once told me,

You see, by me having a Christian background, I can identify with American Christianity, you know. I have all that—Jesus, Mary, I know the Bible, the Biblical scriptures that correlate with the Qur’an. Someone that’s born in a totally Islamic environment wouldn’t have that. Same with people here where it’s all Christians, born in a primarily Christian environment They know nothing about Qur’an and so they can’t relate to it. But by me having this Christian background I’m able to bridge the gap, speak the language, so to speak.

Muslim interfaith dialogue conspicuously clusters around a number of elements Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity. Nor is this feature of American Islam limited to situations of interfaith dialogue. For instance, in 2006, when the California office of CAIR put out radio ads in recognition of the Muslim holiday of Eid-ul-Adha, they produced three spots highlighting three different themes: Abraham, Malcolm X and ‘Mercy and Compassion.’ The radio ad focusing on Abraham had the following script:

This week, Muslims in America and around the world conclude the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, “the Hajj,” with Islam’s most important holiday, called Eid-ul-Adha or “Festival of the Sacrifice.” The central figure in this religious celebration is Prophet Abraham. Muslims believe that Abraham built the first House of Worship to God, known as Kaaba. The Hajj commemorates Abraham’s prayers at the Kaaba. The Qur’an, Islam’s holy book, states: “Who can be better in faith than one who submits his whole self to God, does good and follows the way of Abraham, the true in faith?”

This fact offers an excellent opportunity for all of Abraham’s children—Muslims, Christians and Jews—to recognize and cherish their shared religious heritage and to promote a harmonious future as people of faith.

#### *From Judeo-Christian to Abrahamic?*

Muslims’ emphasis on Abraham allows them to establish a relationship of kinship with the dominant religious identity in the United States. Whether such a genealogical language is the best way to overcome the exclusion remains to be seen. Muslims are partly responding to an Islamophobic trend that was already started by evangelical



Christian movements and political God-talk, but intensified with 9/11. When individuals like Pat Robertson pit Allah and the biblical God against each other, Muslims are forced to prove that Allah is indeed the God of Abraham.

Muslims frequently note that Judeo-Christianity is not an adequate framework to express America's religious diversity. Their Abrahamic language can be read as an argument on behalf of the expansion of boundaries to encompass themselves as a newcomer faith. Such potential boundary shifting can be compared to the shift from Christian to Judeo-Christian, which took place relatively recently in American history.

Although the idea of a Judeo-Christian tradition was around for some time, America continued to be seen up until 1950's (and perhaps is still seen by some) as a "Christian nation" or a "Protestant country." Widespread cultural and political acceptance of Jews under the rubric of Judeo-Christianity came shortly after the antisemitism in the United States reached its height at the end of the war. In response to the Holocaust and Cold War pressures to diminish differences among Western peoples, Jews (together with Catholics) were effectively "Christianized" in the public culture. "In the 1950s, then, the universalist theme in American culture and the call for ecumenism, along with anti-Communism and the creation of Israel, were strong enough—all together—to overcome antisemitism and embrace Judeo-Christianity" (Mart 2004: 116). The transition from Christian to Judeo-Christian was thus possible only when

a consensus emerged among liberal democracies on the unacceptability of institutionalized antisemitism, and the boundary was blurred by way of a redefinition of Christian civilization into Judeo-Christian civilization to incorporate Jews as fellow Westerners (Zolberg and Woon 1999: 20).

The analogy between the shift from Christianity to Judeo-Christianity and the shift from Judeo-Christianity to Abrahamic religions has serious shortcomings. First of all, realpolitik conditions do not favor such a shift. Godless Communism no longer stands as a foil to religious ecumenism. Secondly, today's political God talk seems to have taken Islam or Muslims as the enemy of choice. The same exclusionary forces also target liberal multiculturalism. Even if domestically Muslims can be considered victims, internationally they are more likely to be seen by the public as aggressors or terrorists. (The conflict in Israel/Palestine also casts a shadow over domestic Muslims' chances for inclusion). In short, the conditions that led to the erection of a Judeo-Christian framework in response to antisemitism are not present, at least for now, to facilitate a further shift towards an Abrahamic worldview. Moreover, Islamophobia, far from being a justification for acceptance of the Abrahamic framework, continues to haunt American Muslims. As Zolberg and Woon point out, in many Western nations "the boundary remains quite fixed in relation to Islam and, in some cases, became more clearly defined in the course of confrontations" (1999: 20).

#### *Abrahamic versus Liberal Pluralism*

American Muslims seems to be torn between two alternate paths. At a time of resurgent nativism, they gravitate towards Abrahamic discourse, the language of kinship. This option gives them what can be called a "monotheistic advantage" over other newcomer religions. But they are also aware of the exclusive effects a closure at the level of Abrahamic faiths may have on other faith groups. Therefore, they also resort to the alternative path, liberal pluralism, which asks for de-emphasis of Judeo-Christianity.

They recognize that this alternative is under attack by the very forces that operate to the exclusion of Muslims.

I could see ambivalence with respect to the two paths in the responses of Muslim interfaith activists. Speaking to an interfaith audience, Victor Begg once said, “I always thought America should be Abrahamic, not Judeo-Christian. Or maybe Judeo-Christian-Islamic. But then we have other faiths that we need to think about.” Similarly, Najah Bazy thinks that the Judeo-Christian framework needs to be transcended:

The country seems to be understanding that this is a country of immigration and, you know, what is an American? Is it a Euro-American? And we’re starting to understand that no, we are a tapestry. So I think because of our foundation we have to appreciate that. Where we run into the struggle, though, is because this country is also, also calls itself a Judeo-Christian country, that it’s kind of stamped its level of acceptance. So the country itself, because of the identity it’s given itself—although it’s ethnically diverse, it’s really not religiously diverse in its identity, in how it identifies itself.

While recognizing the need for transcending the current boundaries imposed by the Judeo-Christian identification, Bazy remains satisfied neither with the Abrahamic model nor with its secular alternative. The ambivalence is most visible in her response to a question regarding whether the Abrahamic model will solve the problem of inclusion:

No one can deny that Isaac and Ishmael were both sons of Abraham. And Judaism came way after Abraham. So do I think this is a country that’s going to be of Abrahamic faith? Yes, I do. Is that going to be a problem for Hindus and for Baha’i and for other people? I think so. And that I don’t like, to be honest with you. I don’t like that while you’re creating space for some people it’s at the expense of other people, ‘cause then to me what we’ve done is create the same thing that we had to fight against. What I fear, though, because of that, I fear that America is going to become much like France. I’m afraid of that. That it’s going to lose its identity to really truly just a secular tapestry of all kinds of people in order to avoid conflict. And that scares me, because to me when you eliminate faith from the tapestry of your country then what you’re producing is a lack of moral authority and then when you do that you run into the kinds of problems we’re running into already with crime and with lack of family values. And that’s

where 9/11 I think has been a wake-up call for America. Because it's brought people back to the question of God and spirituality and family values....<sup>84</sup>

*External Ecumenism: American Civil Religion*

As Muslims engage in interfaith dialogue, they step into the public square where there is a specific form into which every particular religion is hailed by American culture. That form is American civil religion. Scholars of American culture have argued that American identity is no longer anchored in Christianity but rather in a more generic deistic civil religion (Bellah et al 1985: 225). This religion is characterized by belief in God, respect for difference and the belief that religion is a matter of individual choice. "If the primary contribution of religion to society is through the character and conduct of citizens, any religion, large or small, familiar or strange, can be of equal value to any other" (Bellah et al 1985; 225). This conception of religion has produced a specific vocabulary, a domain of its own, independent of any particular religion. Entry into that domain and language is a sign of citizenship. For the most part, the interfaith conversation takes place through that language. When Muslims who participate in this language through their involvement in interfaith work go back to their own communities, they might be seen as speaking another language or they might find themselves alienated

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<sup>84</sup> At a talk given to a predominantly non-Muslim audience on a college campus, Najah Bazy (borrowing the language of cell phone ads that were cluttering the airwaves at the time) compared the Sunni and Shia schools of Islam to the "friends" and "family" plans. During my interview, I told her that I liked this distinction and asked whether one could apply it to the two options available to Muslims for accommodation in American society. I asked which plan she would prefer, Abrahamic (family plan) or liberal pluralism (friends plan)? She replied:

Well, I would say that I would prefer the family plan of Abrahamic faith with an invitation to friends, a true invitation to friends. I think if it's just the family plan it's not good, it's almost coercion in faith. If it's just the friends plan, I think we're in serious trouble. Very serious trouble because then you lose moral authority. Core values that our society needs. So I do think the foundation needs to be belief in one God and then even, really, a closer examination of Hinduism and of Sikhism... they're still rooted in the concept of one God. They really are. You know, they might have different variations of how to worship that God, but you know for the most part they're all tied to one Creator, the Divine Creator.

from their (immigrant) communities. Eide Alawan, for example, told me on multiple occasions that

I prefer to be with Christians and Jews more than Muslims. And what I mean by that is that there's dialogue. You know one of the difficult things I find in my lifetime—I've said this many years now—is that we can seem to dialogue with Jews and Christians and Buddhists and talk and feel as though we are brothers, but we have a problem between Shi'a and Sunni and this is a barrier that I know that the American generation will overcome... All I'm saying is, appreciate what both sides bring to the table. If you don't agree with someone that's fine, it's OK to disagree. It's OK to disagree in a manner that's saying... it's just like between me and a Jew or a Christian.

On another occasion he said "I've always been in interfaith work for years. My interest has always been to promote Islam. Promote it in the sense of not conversion but promote it in the sense of understanding in the non-Muslim community. In fact I feel much more comfortable being in a Christian or Jewish community than I do in a Muslim community." I would like to think of Eide Alawan as a believer in American civil religion. Himself an American-born Shia, most of his congregation at the Islamic Center of America are immigrants, some of them very recent. What he finds in interfaith environments is his Muslim identity deployed within American civil religion. He prefers being in environments where non-Islamic forms of American religion are present, over environments where non-American forms of Islam are present. In the former he is at home; in the latter he is a stranger.

I had similar thoughts when I attended an event in downtown Detroit. On the National Day of Prayer, Imam Abdullah El Amin and Imam Achmat Salie lined up on a stage with representatives of other faiths. Prayers from the representatives of each faith were read. El Amin made *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer, in Arabic and then provided an English translation. When his turn came Imam Salie read a long prayer in English. It

started with “All praise is due to the God of all—of those who affirm and deny Him—the God of Adam and Eve –Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, the Virgin Mary, Fatima and Aisha.” He used God, Allah and Lord interchangeably. The speech was colored by ecumenical language as well as the self-help language of generic spirituality: “Beloved Lord, help us in our transition from bigotry to balance, ...from corporate greed to selflessness.” Imam Salie ended his prayer, just as he started it, by mentioning Abraham: “Lastly, we pray for the realization that compassion (not dogma) is the primary religious expression. Ameen –O Allah, Lord of Abraham, hear our prayers.”

One way Muslim interfaith activists, consciously or not, make Islam an American religion is to adopt the ecumenical mode of speech. Islam is detached from its earlier forms (what most American-born Muslims disapprovingly call the “cultural Islam” of immigrants). The process of pouring Islam into its new mold, its American form, gives rise to two kinds of ecumenism. Externally it neutralizes the differences between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Internally, it undermines internal divisions along ethnic, racial and sectarian lines. All of the interfaith activists, Dawud Walid in particular, take extra effort to cultivate an Islam which is beyond *madhabs* (juridical schools of thought). Of the impact of interfaith work on *intrafaith* Muslim life, Alawan says, “I think one of the things that interfaith is allowing me to see is that we should be doing this within the Muslim community.”



Figure 6.3. Interfaith National Day of Prayer in downtown Detroit. Muslims on the stage are Imam Abdullah El Amin (first on the right) and Imam Achmat Salie (third on the left).

#### *Internal Ecumenism: From Interfaith to Intrafaith*

Interfaith work encourages two types of ecumenism: internal ecumenism and external ecumenism. As Muslim practitioners like Eide Alawan and Dawud Walid frequently note, interfaith encounter leads to self-critique and demands internal solidarity.

Internal ecumenism thus refers both to dialogue between Sunnis and Shias (what second and third generation college students call SuShi) and dialogue across ethnoracial divides (between various ethnic immigrant Muslims and indigenous African-American communities). Interfaith activism allows Muslims to reformulate Islam as an American religion. The emphasis on commonalities with other religions is an important characteristic of American Islam because through interfaith work, American Islam gains autonomy from the rest of the Muslim world, where the need for interfaith work is either not felt or remains very small. Critique of overseas Muslim cultures is an important ingredient of American Islam. As Abdullah El Amin remarked,

I think that's the only way that we can go here and now. We have the Shi'a and the Sunni in this area. We have a Sunni-Shi'a symposium, knocking down the walls between us. Because he's a Muslim just like I'm a Muslim, it's the same thing. We both believe in Allah, we both believe in the same Prophet, we both believe in the same Holy Qur'an, and so we have to look more to this than we do to... many people mistake culture for religion. Take for instance in Saudi Arabia women don't drive cars. Well, did Allah say women can't drive cars, or did Saudi Arabian men say that women can't drive cars?

### ***E Pluribus Unum: American Religious Diversity and Muslim Citizenship***

It took some time for Muslims to develop interfaith consciousness. Muslim involvement in interfaith conversation evolved from a proselytizing, defensive mode of engagement (*dawah*) to a more self-confident style of interaction. The transition from *dawah* to dialogue and from conversion to conversation (Takim 2004: 343) is a milestone of Muslim cultural settlement in American society. Starting in the late 1990s, American Muslim institutions developed a more confident attitude toward their non-Muslim environment. A new appreciation of the universalistic “values” of the American



constitution and public culture in general began to claim the privileged place previously occupied by the concept of “*dawah*” (Schumann 2007: 12).

Interfaith dialogue is practiced by Muslims who want to transcend ethnicity. Although there are still many Muslims who consider interfaith work a *dawah* opportunity (or engage in interfaith work under the rubric of *dawah* to legitimate it), there is no doubt that Muslim participation has widened and deepened. For some participants interfaith dialogue can be a survival strategy. In a time of exclusion and anti-Muslim discrimination, interfaith dialogue is both a means of making allies and a form of self-expression.

Interfaith work can also become a status device for the well-established. It is a marker of citizenship and social prominence. Take the example of Victor Begg, a wealthy businessman and founder of the Unity Center. In one sense, he is like the Aristotelian citizens whose activities are a “mixture of character building and public activity among well-bred gentlemen with plenty of free time” (Shklar 1991: 30).

Interfaith activism is linked to citizenship in several ways, not only for the well-established, but for all Muslims involved in it. It is certainly an exercise of citizenship in the sense that it involves civic engagement and participation. Second, by granting status and positive public standing, it becomes an affirmation of equality. Third, it is a way of naturalizing Islam. By participating, Muslims remove a stigma that weights heavily on them. If we are to follow Judith Shklar’s analysis, what are central to citizenship in America are not only issues of agency and empowerment but also those of social standing:

The struggle for citizenship in America has, therefore, been overwhelmingly a demand for inclusion in the polity, an effort to break down excluding barriers to

recognition, rather than an aspiration of civic participation as a deeply involving activity (Shklar 1991: 3).

While factors such as race, gender, religious sect and the immigrant/native divide all play some role in which groups will engage in interfaith activities, the single most important variable appears to be what I call “cultural literacy.” Cultural literacy includes a certain degree of fluency in English and—perhaps more important—familiarity with mainstream American culture and its religious landscape. It is the importance of cultural literacy that puts African-Americans, women and second generation immigrants in the forefront of interfaith work. These individuals usually do not occupy the front line in the hierarchy of religious authority.

The figure of Abraham—who does not occupy a central place in Muslim cultures in their conventional settings—gains prominence in Muslim minority contexts. He is one of the few common threads through which Islam can enter the American (Western) imagination and find a foothold of legitimacy. A response to the exclusion generated by 9/11, Abrahamic discourse acknowledges the fact that (legal) citizenship alone is not enough to protect the Muslims from the public sentiment. If civil rights work is an appeal to the state, interfaith work is an appeal to the public. In the post-9/11 era, Muslims have gravitated more towards Abrahamic discourse than liberal pluralism. They rely on the tropes of genealogy and kinship to legitimate Islam as an American religion. As such, interfaith work becomes an emotional plea for inclusion in the nation. It draws on familial bonds to undo otherness. One reason Muslim interfaith activists are drawn to Abrahamic discourse, even though they are ambivalent about its merit over secular, liberal pluralism, is that they see secular pluralism as merely an extension of citizenship

discourse, which in their eyes has proven inadequate for protecting Muslims. Abrahamic discourse, on the other hand, is a discourse that works on the “nation” rather than the “state”. It is an attempt to erase differences in the public mind by assimilating Muslims into the category of “fellow Abrahamic believer.” Therefore, if the post-WWII discourse of Judeo-Christianity allowed the “Christianization” or normalization of Jews, Abrahamic discourse in the post-9/11 era responds to a comparable Muslim demand for “Christianization” or normalization via inclusion, kinship and commonality.

## **Conclusion**

As a prominent citizenship practice of Muslims in the post-9/11 era, acts of interfaith dialogue contribute to the inclusion of Islam as a legitimate “kindred” religion. Muslim claims to kinship and demand for the recognition of Islam as part of an extended Judeo-Christian tradition represent a demand for the shifting of boundaries that presently leave Islam outside the fold of American religion. Interfaith dialogue also takes its Muslim participants into the realm of American civil religion, which as an empty form is open to all religious contents. Through acquisition of its vocabulary and style, Islam becomes a civil religion, a generic American religion with an emphasis on diversity, moral universalism and toleration. Islam becomes one color among many. In this chapter, I have focused on interfaith dialogue as one type of Muslim response to 9/11 at the local level. Certainly race, socio-economic background and the immigrant-indigenous dichotomy shape the opportunity structure for interfaith activism. But in general terms, there seems to be a “confidence threshold” that has to be reached in order for Muslims to become involved in interfaith work in a sustained way. That threshold is reached mainly

when both cultural literacy and a certain degree of social and economic comfort are secured. That is why the number of Muslim participants is still disproportionately small, given the size of the area's Muslim community and the growing demand for Muslims as interfaith partners.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Funny Jihad: Muslim Comedy Takes Flight**

#### **Introduction**

Fun and jihad? Many people are intrigued when they see the words “Muslim” and “comedy” in the same sentence. The very idea of “Muslim comedy” seems funny at least in one of the two senses of the word. When you say something is funny, people sometimes ask for clarification: “funny ha-ha” or “funny-peculiar”? Reactions to the idea of Muslim comedy usually belong to the second category. And this is not so peculiar. In American society, the dominant image of Muslims and Islam is far from funny. You rarely see a smiling Muslim face on TV. On the news or in the movies, Muslims look either angry or scared—when they manage not to be terrorists. The typical Muslim image is stern, foreign and dangerous. Since the events that brought broad recognition to Muslim identity in American society are acts not of humor but of horror, Americans are likely to see a connection between jihad (or Muslims) and tragedy, rather than comedy. But in an interesting turn of events, there has been an upsurge of Muslim ethnic comedy since the events of 9/11. More and more Muslim individuals and groups are appearing on stage with comic routines. And they are attracting larger and larger non-Muslim audiences. This paradoxical outcome raises two related questions. The first can be posed

both empirically (why this surge after 9/11?) and theoretically (what is the link between tragic and comic in the context of minority groups?). The second question is a hermeneutical one: how can we interpret the phenomenon of Muslim comedy and more specifically, what does it tell us about Muslim citizenship in American society? The following discussion of emergent Muslim ethnic comedy is organized around these questions. It also proposes a new theoretical framework for the sociologically undertheorized phenomenon of ethnic comedy.

### **The Impact of 9/11: Tragic Neurosis, Comic Symptom**

The tragic consequences of 9/11 are all too obvious: the deaths of innocent people, the collapse of the nation's sense of security, and a backlash against people of Muslim and/or Middle Eastern backgrounds. The external reaction took the form of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the internal response included securitization of domestic life, erosion of civil liberties, and an epidemic of fear and anxiety among American citizens. The impact of 9/11 on the American psyche is a cultural trauma (Smelser 2004) that can best be compared to neurosis. The heightened sense of "one nation under threat," reinforced in the ensuing years by government policies, created a disjuncture between the state and the nation—or to put it differently, a withdrawal from *demos* to *ethnos* (Balibar 2004: 9). The assumed congruence between nation and state was lost. With this new understanding of "us," the American community was re-imagined. As Engin Isin has observed, nation-states in the age of globalization increasingly rely on "governing through neurosis" (Isin 2004), a phenomenon that marks a new stage in contemporary

practices of governmentality (Foucault 1991).<sup>85</sup> Regardless of whether the source of neurosis is imaginary or real, the fact remains: in times of crisis the nation shrinks. As it did after 9/11, a shrinking nation left behind an abandoned space that was inside the state and yet outside the nation. The relaxed and inclusive nature of American society gave way to an anxious and exclusive sense of what it means to be American. Some people with full legal citizenship suddenly came to be seen as cultural aliens. In short, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 produced a neurosis in the nation and altered the landscape of American consciousness.<sup>86</sup> A collective neurosis resulted in the release of collective psychosocial energies such as patriotism, solidarity and heightened symbolism (e.g., renewed interest in flags and emphasis on borders). This loss of membership in the nation also explains why Muslims, already caricatured as grim people, continue to display anxiety and fear.

What I have described in psychoanalytic terms could be told in geological terms as well. The impact of 9/11 on the surface of American society is in effect an ethno-quake or a socio-quake: it opened a fracture on the surface of the social body.<sup>87</sup> This tectonic shock to the social landscape turned a formerly more or less unified surface (us, the citizenry) into two pieces. The crack separates a large piece— into which the sense of “us” recedes— from a very small piece where “not-us” remains. A nation which had been almost blind and certainly indifferent to the existence of this piece of itself (i.e., Muslims in America) now suddenly *begins to see it* because now that piece has been externalized,

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<sup>85</sup> This new turn in politics is recognized by various observers including journalists like Naomi Klein, who discusses it under the rubric of *Shock Doctrine* (Klein 2007).

<sup>86</sup> This is certainly not limited to the exclusion of Muslims. Recent securitization and criminalization of “illegal” immigrants is also closely linked to 9/11 and the heightened sense of nationalism.

<sup>87</sup> There is an interesting connection between earthquakes and laughter. “One study reported that survivors of the San Francisco earthquake laughed at the slightest provocation” (Brottman 2004: 76).

objectified. Once the crack is produced, ethnic/religious stereotypes about Muslims begin to proliferate.<sup>88</sup> In this process of hardening of stereotypes, the status of Muslims rapidly changed from *invisible* strangers to extremely *visible strangers*. I would argue that this status of extremely visible stranger is crucial to the question of why we have an upsurge of comedy right after a huge tragedy.

We have seen an explosion of Muslim comedy since 9/11 because it created the double conditions necessary for the deployment of ethnic comedy: *otherness* and *relevance*. Otherness and relevance were simultaneously produced when America changed from being a *society divided into citizens* to a *nation standing united*. This split between the nation and the Muslim alien not only turned the spotlight on Muslims as an object of scrutiny and source of danger, it also turned the nation into an audience—an audience that came to the ethnic theater with a newly calcified stereotype of Muslims in mind, an audience constantly reminded to report any suspicious people and activities to the authorities. This is most evident at airports, where the relationship between Muslim identity and American sovereignty comes into the open. Widespread anxiety about aviation security, ever-more-intrusive screening procedures, and the creation of no-fly lists all gave rise to a “surveillance society,” a “safety state” (Lyon 2003). The airport has become a site of passage with its own rites. At the airport, Muslim visibility and difference reach new heights. Ethnic, racial and religious profiling all assumed a new meaning after 9/11. Incidentally, Leon Rappoport, a scholar of ethnic comedy writing on the impact of 9/11 recently observed that

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<sup>88</sup> “Sometimes on the street” says Azhar Usman, “I say to people: relax... I am Muslim but I am an American Muslim. I consider myself a very patriotic American Muslim, which means I would die for this country ... by blowing myself up ... inside a Dunkin’ Donuts.”



There are good reasons to argue that 9/11 has had a more fundamental impact on the general meaning of race and ethnicity. Traditional differences between most ethnic groups are fading because terrorist attacks make no such distinctions. All of us are in the same boat, equally and impartially threatened... When any group of people, no matter how diverse, is facing a collective, life-threatening situation they invariably come together and set aside their differences... The one exception has been Muslims and others with a Near Eastern background. (Rappoport 2005: 125)

This in a sense summarizes the tragic consequence of 9/11 for American Muslims. With their newfound (*negative*) recognition, they moved to center stage as objects of suspicion, stereotyping and wiretapping. Two instances in the aftermath of 9/11 where Muslim identity and humor were associated with each other provide good illustrations of the post-9/11 milieu.

*Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, a movie released in 2006 starring comedian Albert Brooks, takes off from the following premise: the American government sends a down-on-his-luck Jewish comedian to the Muslim world to find out “what makes Muslims laugh.” Although the comedian visits only India and Pakistan— countries which, despite their huge Muslim populations, remain peripheral to most Americans’ imagination of the Muslim world—the implication is obvious: Muslims may seem dour, but deep down they must have some sense of humor waiting to be discovered. Interestingly, the film presents its Pakistani characters as more dangerous, more “authentic”, and much funnier than the Indians.<sup>89</sup>

This almost optimistic view of Muslims’ relation to comedy was overshadowed by the explosive controversy of the Danish cartoon crisis, which began in late 2005. Muslim reactions to offensive cartoons published in a Danish newspaper were perceived

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<sup>89</sup> Commenting on the movie, one Muslim comedian said “I don’t like the title of that movie. That’s like saying looking for drug addiction in a crack house or looking for stupidity in the White House.”

by western publics as an example of Muslim intolerance for freedom of speech and lack of understanding for humor. Though some American Muslims felt obligated to comment on the film and the cartoon fiasco, both these events revolving around Muslim humor (and its lack) were in a sense external to the community.<sup>90</sup> They both concerned Muslims outside America, and to the extent that American Muslims did wade into the issues, they frequently took them as opportunities to dissociate American Muslims from Muslims abroad. And as the issues became less acute, both the image of Muslims as lacking humor and the Danish cartoon crisis itself became the butt of jokes for Muslim comedians in America.

So, where does the comic come into the picture as this new epoch unfolds? If the tragedy of 9/11 contributed to the creation of certain “forms” (stereotypes about Muslims), comedy became possible when Muslims started to play with those forms. Mary Douglas’s characterization of humor as “play on forms” (Douglas 1975) helps us establish the link between tragic events and the emergence of Muslim comedy. Tragic events (crises) and the neuroses they trigger lead to the hardening of stereotypes (i.e. all Muslims are terrorists) and the objectification of ethnic groups. Some of the Muslims who see those incongruous forms thrown at them in the media and in personal encounters eventually decide to throw them back. The personal tragedy of being ethnic (an outsider, a stranger, different, stereotyped) is now made public through irony and comedy. And as has often been said, prejudice has no greater enemy than irony.

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<sup>90</sup> Dripping irony, another Muslim comedian says “to show that Muslims are not terrorists, there is no better way than to burn down the embassy or the KFC... have riots, kill people to show the world that Islam means peace: ‘if you don’t believe it, I will kill you!’” Jokes like this one also serve to dissociate Muslims in America from Muslims abroad.

## **Muslim Ethnic Comedy: Space, Players, Forms**

Ethnic comedy is intimately linked to the fortunes of ethnic communities. As my earlier discussion of the context points out, Muslim comedy is in a sense a form of “gallows humor” that “arises in a precarious or dangerous situation” (Koller 1988: 12). For Muslim communities in the United States, ethnic comedy grew out of danger. Islamophobia is what has made Muslim comedy a phenomenon of our times. The discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes from which other Muslims suffer are a godsend for the Muslim comedian. Muslim comics thus represent the experience of most Muslims, but in an inverted way. They are perhaps the only beneficiaries of the *negative charisma* associated with being Muslim. Muslim comedy is the world of Islamophobia turned upside down.

The career of Muslim standup comedians resembles the story of Benjamin Disraeli, who in a totally different setting exploited the negative charisma that was associated with being Jewish in nineteenth century Britain. Hannah Arendt devotes part of her discussion of the history of antisemitism to Disraeli, who managed to float above its consequences (1973: 68-79). Far from being a disadvantage, he turned his Jewishness into a source of distinction and a privilege. This “potent wizard” says Arendt, recognized “how much more exciting it would be for himself and for others... to accentuate the fact that he was a Jew,” for he “discovered the secret of how to preserve luck, that natural miracle of pariahdom.” Despite the fact that he came from an entirely assimilated family and (according to Arendt) lacked any religious knowledge, he nonetheless exploited the negative charisma associated with being Jewish. “He knew instinctively that everything depended upon... an accentuation of his lucky ‘strangeness’.” In Disraeli’s own words,

“what is a crime among the multitude is only a vice among the few.” The crime of being Jewish “could be transformed at any moment into an attractive ‘vice’” (Arendt 1973: 69). In a similar vein, Muslim comedians are exploiting a kind of “lucky strangeness.” What makes other Muslims suffer becomes a career opportunity for them.

Muslim comedy is an emerging “market.” Not only is its audience growing, but it is also a new career field for Muslim cultural entrepreneurs, mostly second generation young people and converts. “The time is right” says Zarqa Nawaz, the Muslim producer of a popular Canadian sitcom, “the marketplace has never been this curious about Muslims.” As cultural entrepreneurs, they claim the knowledge of both worlds: ethnic and mainstream. This is best illustrated in their ability to go back and forth between accented and normal speech.<sup>91</sup> As arbiters of a cultural encounter and as field guides to a contact zone, these stand-up comedians are situated in a unique position. They can practice simultaneously the *two ways of seeing* things: ethnic and majority. They can “leap” from one side to the other. This position is often a tragic one, where a person belongs to both worlds and neither. The comic stands uneasily on the crack that separates the two, yet by standing there the comic becomes a sort of stitch that ties together the two sides of the divide.

Muslim comedy is produced and consumed in different ways. Take three recent products of popular culture. Between 9/11 and the time of the writing of this dissertation, these comic enterprises gained national recognition.

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<sup>91</sup> It is important to remember the well-known distinction between an accent or a dialect and a language. An accent is an accent only in relation to a language. What is crucial here is that the language itself is just another accent: the official, standard accent. Bourdieu has aptly drawn attention to the relationship between linguistic and political unifications (Bourdieu 1991: 45). An accent is imperfect and thus funny only from the point of view of the official accent (language).

First, a new TV sitcom, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, started in January 2007.

*Little Mosque* revolves around the daily experiences of a small Muslim (mostly immigrant) community living in Mercy, a fictional small town in Saskatchewan. It explores the funny side of adapting to life in post-9/11 North America. In the first episode, the community tries to establish a mosque in the parish hall of a church. A passer-by, seeing the group praying, rushes to call a “terrorist hot line” to report Muslims praying “just like on CNN.” In another episode the Muslim residents hire a Canadian-born imam from Toronto. He is a lawyer but he quits his father’s law firm to take the job as an imam. This, his father thinks, is career suicide. The young imam is detained at the airport while speaking to his mother on his cell phone because he is overheard saying: “If dad thinks that’s suicide, so be it.” Security staff rush in when they hear what he says next: “This is Allah’s plan for me.” As Neil MacFarquhar, *New York Times* correspondent for American Muslim affairs, observes,

that fictional moment is an all-too-possible occurrence as witnessed when six imams were hauled off a US Airways plane in Minnesota in November after apparently spooking at least one fellow passenger by murmuring prayers that included the word Allah. (“Sitcom’s Precarious Premise: Being Muslim Over Here,” *New York Times*, 12/07/2006).

Though it began life with decidedly murky prospects, the show soon became the number one sitcom on Canada’s CBC network.<sup>92</sup> During a visit to Detroit on April 5, 2008, Zarqa Nawaz, the Muslim creator of *Little Mosque*, explained the reason why her show gained so much popularity: “It is appealing because it shows Muslims being normal. It humanizes Muslims.” She also adds “I want the broader society to look at us as

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<sup>92</sup> The series premiere attracted 2.09 million viewers, an impressive number for Canada, where an audience of one million is considered a runaway hit. The CBC reported that it had not had a show draw that size audience in a decade (“*Little Mosque* Defuses Hate With Humor,” *New York Times*, 01/16/2007).

normal, with the same issues and concerns as anyone else.” Nawaz named her production company “FUNdamentalist Films.” When asked why, she says she wants to “put the fun back in fundamentalism.”<sup>93</sup>

The other two success stories are the phenomenal rise of *Allah Made Me Funny: The Official Muslim Comedy Tour* (AMMF) and *Axis of Evil* (AOE), two comedy troupes. In my discussion of Muslim ethnic comedy I will focus on these two groups which have gained prominence and national recognition in the world of Muslim American popular culture and even made tentative steps towards crossing over into mainstream culture.<sup>94</sup> The AMMF troupe includes Preacher Moss, Azhar Usman and Mohammed Amer. Perhaps we should start with the official description of the group:

*Allah Made Me Funny: The Official Muslim Comedy Tour* is the world’s first and only organized standup comedy tour featuring America’s top Muslim comedians. It is a community project centered around the promotion of shared core values. It simultaneously brings American Muslims out of their typical isolation to a mainstream comedy show and introduces mainstream American fans of standup to a uniquely Muslim perspective. (*Allah Made Me Funny: The Official Muslim Comedy Tour 2008 Program*, February 15, 2008, p.5)

The ethnic and cultural origins of comedians are also important. Preacher Moss, now in his early forties and from the Washington D.C. area, is an African American

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<sup>93</sup> Nawaz’s first short film bears the title, “BBQ Muslims” (1996) and is inspired by her anger at the finger-pointing at Muslims in the aftermath of Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. In this short film, two Muslim brothers are suspected of being Middle Eastern terrorists after their backyard barbecue explodes. A radio news announcer says, at the start of the film, “this bombing has all the markings of Muslim fundamentalists: a large hole in the ground, charred grass and dead animals.”

<sup>94</sup> A dimension of the emergence of Muslim comedy which we cannot neglect is the creation of various Muslim media where a dispersed community finds a common public sphere. Of particular note is the launch of Bridges TV in 2004 as the first Muslim American television channel in English. Muslim comedians are a staple of Bridges TV. In addition to Bridges TV, Muslim community is experiencing a proliferation of online and print magazines and weeklies such as *The Muslim Observer* (published in Detroit, Michigan). The Muslim comedy and the Muslim minority in general are also taking advantage of the revolutionary opportunities opened by new media such as YouTube. Most rising comedians are still local and they use venues like *YouTube* to reach to audiences. Both AMMF and AOE also have pages on virtual networking sites like *Facebook* and *MySpace* and make a point during live performances of inviting their fans to visit their pages and to “poke ‘em.”

convert to Islam. He occasionally incorporates into his comedy his experience at his mother's Baptist church. Preacher Moss founded AMMF in 2004 and looked for companions. He was soon joined by Azhar Usman.

*Axis of Evil* is not quite a trio: it consists of Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani and Aron Kader, all from the West Coast, and Dean Obeidallah, their East coast "guest member." While the larger social dynamics that brought both comedy groups to the stage are the same, they represent two different reactions. Therefore, one can see some overlaps as well as divergences between their primary identifications.

Several things can be said by way of a quick comparison. In terms of orientation, AOE could be called ethnic-ethnic, whereas AMMF is Muslim pan-ethnic. While it is hard to separate the Middle East from Islam in the popular imagination, it is important to note that many Muslims in America are doubly "ethnic": (1) ethnic in the sense of being Arab or Pakistani living in America, and (2) ethnic in the sense of being Muslim in America, regardless of their origin. Self-identifications like "Palestinian" or "Middle Easterner" correspond to the first sense of ethnicity, exemplified here by the Axis of Evil comedy troupe. This type of ethnicity maintains strong (cultural) ties to an overseas nation of origin. The second sense of ethnicity, which I've called pan-Muslim ethnicity (or just "Muslimness"), characterizes Allah Made Me Funny. It functions similarly to Jewish-American ethnicity. It is dissociated from any overseas ethnic origin, or acknowledges only a nominal link, yet still remains ethnic within the American context. In short, AMMF is Muslim first, ethnic second while AOE is ethnic first, Muslim second.

This distinction can be seen in the naming of the two groups. Azhar Usman explains the rationale behind the naming of *Allah Made Me Funny* in the beginning of their first DVD:

Well, the word Allah— which is a word that conjures up more negative images in the minds of non-Muslim Americans than any other word concerning Islam— is actually beautiful. And it is nothing more, nothing less than the Arabic word for God. So *Allah Made Me Funny* is the Muslim answer to God Made Me Funky.

*Axis of Evil* on the other hand, draws on President Bush's famous 2002 State of the Union address, where he designated two Middle Eastern countries (Iran and Iraq) together with North Korea as an "Axis of Evil." The members of AOE are of Arab and Iranian descent, their routine always includes mention that they're still looking for a North Korean comic to join them. Two of the performers were working in Hollywood (most often cast as terrorists) before they turned to stand-up in the aftermath of 9/11.

One thing needs to be clarified at the outset: Muslim comedy did not begin with 9/11. But it did take on a distinctive form and quality after it. 9/11 is a turning point in the history of American Muslim ethnicity as well as in the history of American Muslim comedy. Preacher Moss of AMMF was a comedian producing primarily but not exclusively African American humor. He was writing for George Lopez (*The George Lopez Show*) and Darrell Hammond (*Saturday Night Live*). He was a mainstream comedian with an African American edge. As an individual comedian he was Muslim. but this was not the primary framework defining his work.

Similarly, Dean Obeidallah of AOE repeatedly says that before 9/11 he was a white guy doing generic comedy. After 9/11 he says he lost his white status and became Arab. The neurosis was thus at work not only in the production of an American nation



estranged from its Muslim members but also in the production of Obeidallah as an Arab and as an ethnic comedian.<sup>95</sup>

The ethnic backgrounds of the AMMF trio mirror the overall composition of the American Muslim community. The three major groups, South Asians, Arab Americans and African Americans are represented by Azhar Usman, Mohammad Amer and Preacher Moss, respectively. And the convert experience, an increasingly important part of the Muslim community in the United States, is also represented by Preacher Moss. This last element is absent from *Axis of Evil*, where the preferred identity is not Muslim but Middle Eastern.

After these general notes on the comedy troupes we can now take a closer look at the profile of each group and their comic routines. But first it would be unfair to the standup comedians if I didn't make one disclaimer about these jokes. I've noticed that when I write them down they lose a crucial element. Academic writing is just not the best venue for comedy. All I can do by way of giving due credit to the comedians is to say that I have seen audiences (myself included) laugh hard at most of these jokes.

### **Allah Made Me Funny**

I had the opportunity to watch the members of both groups perform in various settings. The members of AMMF, in particular, appear almost every year at the annual convention of the *Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)* and frequently at various local events organized by the Muslim Student Associations (MSAs). I had seen Azhar Usman perform at MSA's annual Eid dinner in 2005 at the University of Michigan, Ann

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<sup>95</sup> There is a growing literature on "racialization" of Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11. For a recent notable example see (Jamal and Naber 2008).

Arbor. There was an audience of three hundred students, some of them with their families. One of my early conclusions about the nature of Muslim comedy was that it is a second generation phenomenon. I saw the group most recently in mid-February 2008, when they performed at a fundraising event at the Lund Auditorium of Dominican University in the suburbs of Chicago. All the tickets were sold out. There were approximately fifteen hundred people. Most of them were young people, most likely second generation. The audience was predominantly of South Asian Muslim ethnic background (Indian and Pakistani), reflecting the ethnic composition of the Chicago area Muslim community. The audience also included Arab American and African American Muslims, as well as some non-Muslim Americans.

The first stand-up comedian to appear on the stage that evening was Mohammed (“call me Mike”) Amer. He is ethnically Palestinian, born in Kuwait and raised in the United States (Houston, Texas). Amer began his comic career at a young age—20—doing Arab ethnic and generic stand-up comedy. His jokes deal with issues of immigration, ethnic food and practices, and the symbolic burden of names like his own. That night, speaking of a recent trip to Europe, Mo Amer said this:

I had such a good time in England. I am Palestinian-American, I have been here seventeen years, almost eighteen. I am getting my passport next year. [applause] Alhamdulillah... Alhamdulillah... But I am still “homeless” you know, I’m still homeless. You know when it really got to me? In England there was this poster when I went through immigration. At the airport they have them everywhere. It is a poster with a dog. And he has a passport around his neck. A dog! It says “Get your dog’s citizenship today!” I am a human being and I have been waiting for seventeen years and (ruff ruff!) “get your citizenship”... And it’s not even an English bulldog. It’s a German shepherd!

Immigration is not easy, right? Immigration is not an easy process. Try to call immigration. It just does not work out. One time I called immigration for my uncle. It says, “Hello, you have reached INS, naturalization processing. Please hold.” And then comes the hold music: “never gonna get it, never gonna get it.”

The comedy show that evening had a guest appearance by a 13-year-old comedian named Shaan Khan. Shaan is an eighth grader who is developing a local reputation for his impersonation of Azhar Usman of AMMF. One of the early skits that Usman no longer uses in his routine involves an Indo-Pakistani immigrant uncle (he calls him “Uncle Let-me-‘splain-you”) who fails to see how his broken English does more harm than good when he decides to act as a spokesperson for the local mosque in an interview on national television. As Shaan says, elaborating on Usman’s character: “I don’t care if you can’t speak English. I don’t mind. But why are you on TV?!!”<sup>96</sup>

Preacher Moss, an African-American Muslim comedian whose real name is Bryant Reginald Moss, is in his early forties. He came up with the idea for Allah Made Me Funny and started the group in 2004. That evening Moss started his routine— as he often does— on a didactic note: “We have to battle stereotypes.” He continued,

Like you never see Muslim comedians on TV. Because all the Muslims they can put on TV for notoriety are Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. Neither of these guys is funny. Think about it. First you got Bin Laden but you can’t find him. They can’t find him, but he releases a DVD every month and a half. He is like the Muslim Tupac! They can’t find him. They should change their name from Al Qaida to Al Hide-a.

Preacher Moss’s jokes revolve around his conversion, issues of race including his own interracial marriage (to an Indian woman) and political satire. Preacher frequently jokes about the double jeopardy of being black and Muslim. Back when John Ashcroft

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<sup>96</sup> Elsewhere Azhar Usman complains about such uncles’ tendency to brag about the number of Muslims in the United States: “We have these uncles in the community who are always bragging about it. [he puts on an Indian accent] ‘We have 7 million Muslims in America. Can you imagine, Bob?’” Azhar continues: “Right! The funny thing is that he is bragging about it to his friend at work: ‘Can you believe it, Bob? 7 Million Muslims in America?’ He thinks Bob is impressed. Bob is not impressed. Bob is scared!!”

was attorney general, he said in an interview, “I am worried they’re going to put race and religion on driver’s licenses... So when I get pulled over, I get two tickets.”

One of the major themes in Muslim comedy is “immigrant time” in America. Preacher asks: how can Muslims speed everywhere and still be late to everything? After poking fun at immigrant Muslims for always being late, he jumps to current events:

“People are saying crazy stuff about Muslims. Sometimes people blame everything on Muslims. Some might even blame natural disasters on Muslims. [speaks as a reporter] ‘We are now in Orlando and we are waiting for Hurricane AbdulMalik. It was supposed to be here eight hours ago but you know how they are.’”

The last of the comic trio to appear on stage that night was Azhar Usman. A native of the Chicago area, Usman is a lawyer turned comedian. He calls himself the *Ayatollah of Comedy*. He is a portly man in his early thirties and wears a full black beard and occasionally a kufi (skullcap). When ABC’s *Nightline* featured Azhar Usman as a Muslim comedian, after a brief introduction to the topic they cautioned their audience:

So far you have not seen the face of the man our story is about. He is an attorney. He was born in Chicago, raised in Skokie, Illinois. Now he is trying to make it as a standup comic and he looks like this [pause... Azhar’s image appears on the screen]: Azhar Usman! He is a devout Muslim. Question: Does a guy who looks like this have any chance of making it in standup? Or when you first saw this did you think, just for a moment, “terrorist,” “Taliban”? (*ABC Nightline*, March 17, 2005, 11:30pm)

The *Nightline* people were not totally wrong. Azhar himself jokes that when he walks on the street, people who see him feel shocked and whisper to each other:

“Osaaama, Saddaam, Talibaaan, Obama!” He goes on,

I am glad that you guys are laughing. Sometimes I am on stage and people are scared. People are looking at me as if I am responsible for 9/11. Can you believe that: Me, responsible for Nine Eleven. Nine Eleven? No... 7-Eleven? Maybe.

Azhar Usman's "Muslim shtick" pokes fun at both the Muslim community and the larger society. The second half of his routine that evening was devoted to jokes about various ethnicities. He would ask, "Any Malaysians in the house? any Egyptians? any Pakistanis?" etc. then poke fun at a cultural element specific to that group. His own ethnic background (Indian) informs a significant portion of his ethnic jokes. I have observed, however, that he tailors his ethnic jokes to his audience.

What looms largest in Azhar's performance is his airport jokes. If Azhar Usman himself is the very model of a post-9/11 Muslim standup comedian, his jokes about the airport experience are the epitome of today's emergent Muslim comedy.

My least favorite thing about being a comedian is all the traveling. That's right. The moment I have to walk into the airport. Heads turn simultaneously. The security... [As though speaking into a walkie-talkie] 'We got a Mohammad at 4 o'clock.' 'Can I see your ID, please?' 'We'll need to do an extra security check.' Even worse is the moment I have to get onto the plane. That's right. People are shocked. They are in the middle of a conversation. "So where are you from...?" And then they suddenly see me. [slightly hysterical voice] 'Oh my God! I'm gonna die. [desperate whisper into cell phone] Honey, I love you. He is s-o-o hairy.

[Here Azhar takes a break from the drama and complains to his audience:]

I don't really understand why these people are so scared of me. I don't get it. Just think about it: if I were the crazy Muslim planning to hijack the plane, this is totally not the disguise I would be in. [pirouetting his large, bearded self around the stage] It doesn't exactly slip me under the radar.

[He concludes his flight story with exaggerated relief]

Of course, once the plane safely lands, they are just looking over smiling. Ha haa ha. I am waiting for one real honest passenger to come up to me at the end of the flight... He says, "Excuse me sir, I thought you were gonna kill us. Ha ha. Sorry about that. Ha ha. Remember when you got up to go to bathroom? I was gonna stab you. Ha ha." That's what it feels like these days, man.

This joke provides a perfect illustration of the Muslim airport experience, where the negative charisma of being Muslim assumes full transparency. At the airport, those who have so far (i.e., in the city, at the ticket counter, etc.) been treated equally suddenly become suspect. Before they enter the airport they may be outside the definition of the nation, but they are still protected by the law; that is, still inside the state. But when they walk into the airport— where internal and external meet and where external (state) borders are now internalized (Balibar 2004: 1)— they suddenly feel their protected status begin to evaporate. Now they risk falling outside of both the nation and the state. Even those Muslims who do not consider themselves particularly profiled or discriminated against in everyday life suddenly begin to feel uneasy. They enter into *communitas* (Turner 1969), becoming occupants of an anti-structure where they lack any status.<sup>97</sup> The metal detectors turn citizens into naked bodies, at least electronically. Strip search and other security rites of passage through the border show them the hard edge of the nation.

For Muslim citizens, the disjuncture between the nation and the state reaches its peak— at least psychologically— at the airport, because there they find themselves exiting the state at a time when they are already excluded from the nation. At that moment they become aware of the sovereignty beyond law, something experienced in its pure form in prison camps such as Guantanamo Bay. In short, at the airport, Muslims come face to face with the nation without the protections of the state. They fear and tremble.<sup>98</sup> This existential anxiety affects both sides: it brings extra security checks and

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<sup>97</sup> Here is Turner's definition of anti-structure: "Liminality, the optimal setting of communitas relations, and communitas, a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes, together constitute what one might call "anti-structure" (Turner 1973: 216).

<sup>98</sup> Maysoon Zayid, a Palestinian-American comedian from New Jersey, describes how she hates flying out of Newark airport. "I have cerebral palsy," says Zayid, "so when I walk in, security doesn't just see an

profiling on the one hand and a sense of public and institutional discrimination, stress and insecurity on the other.

The fear a Muslim inspires is associated with the unpredictability of his behavior. What if he is a terrorist? What if he hijacks the plane? What if he is only pretending to be normal? All these questions that citizens are asked to consider by the airport authorities transform the Muslim passenger in the eyes of his fellow travelers into a source of unpredictability and danger. When a Muslim like Azhar Usman gets onto the plane, faces fall. Danger is imminent. The anxiety reaches new heights when the plane takes off. Up until take-off, the charisma and unpredictability of the Muslim has been contained in his body, but with take-off, it contaminates the entire plane. The sense of suspense and anxiety ends when the plane safely lands. The relief from danger is reflected on the passengers' faces. People are laughing and almost thankful to the Muslim passenger for not doing what they feared he might do. Flying while Muslim thus becomes an extremely public event.

Much more could be said in the way of interpretation. Let me emphasize here one other dimension of this type of jokes: their remarkable transparency and universality. Muslims and non-Muslims alike can understand and laugh at airport and airplane jokes. They are simultaneously ethnic and national, particular and universal. As such, these jokes represent the comic surface where Muslim and American experiences intersect most "dangerously" and with full intelligibility.

### **Axis of Evil**

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Arab. They see a shaking Arab. 'She's nervous!' "And I'm afraid of flying so I'm crying. So now, I'm a crying, shaking Arab. 'She's guilty!'"

The Axis of Evil comedy tour started in November 2005 and gained national recognition with an appearance on *Comedy Central* on March 10, 2007. The group also put out a DVD in 2007 which features Maz Jobrani, Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, and guest member Dean Obeidallah. They perform on a stage festooned with nuclear warning signs and each comedian is frisked by a tough-looking female security screener in full TSA regalia as he steps onto the stage. Maz Jobrani is an Iranian-American and jokes about the Iranian accent and the Iranian diaspora's tendency to call themselves "Persians" to distance themselves from contemporary Iran. In explaining his reason for becoming a comedian, Jobrani talks about how the only available roles for Middle Easterners in Hollywood are as terrorists. He says that after several such stints (including one with Chuck Norris) he decided not to take those parts any longer and took to stand-up instead.

Ahmed Ahmed is an Egyptian-American who also had an acting career in Hollywood. He was similarly dissatisfied with the parts available to Middle Eastern actors. Ahmed's routine typically revolves around the absurdities of the security check at the airport. He says that his name matches one of the FBI's most wanted terrorists. So each time he goes to the airport he has to go through extra security checks. He says,

It is a bad time to be from the Middle East. I read a statistic on CBS.com. Right after 9/11 hate crimes against Arabs, Middle Eastern people and Muslims went up over 1000 %. Apparently that puts us in the fourth place behind blacks, gays and Jews. You guys know this? We are still in the fourth place. So what do we have to do to be number one in something?

Ahmed Ahmed notes that often people don't believe that he is a comedian. Especially when the airport security staff ask him what he does for a living. They always say, "So tell us a joke." He replies, "Well, I just graduated from flight school." Once on



board, Ahmed looks around the plane. “Do you know who the air marshal is on the plane? The guy reading *People* magazine upside down while keeping an eye on me.”

Aron Kader is a Palestinian-American whose mother is Mormon. His jokes include impersonations of President Bush and accent jokes about his cousin in Jordan. He pokes fun at anti-American sentiment in the Middle East and uses relatively vulgar language. Unlike Jobrani and Ahmed, Aron Kader looks more white than Middle Eastern. He also talks about how he is often thought to be Jewish because of his first name.

Dean Obeidallah is perhaps the most interesting member of the group. Growing up in northern New Jersey, Obeidallah had an Arab father and an Italian mother. Despite the fact that his father was an immigrant, he never considered himself a minority. Like Kader, he looks white and his re-discovery of his ethnic identity is a post-9/11 phenomenon. He is another cultural entrepreneur who has used his newly found ethnicity to reinvent his comic career. In his routine, Obeidallah criticizes the backlash against people of Middle Eastern backgrounds. Referring to a recent movie title, he claims that these days the idea of “Middle Easterners on a plane” scares people more than snakes.

People are afraid of us because they don't know who we are. There are only two news stories about us. Bad story: We are terrorists. Good story: We are alleged terrorists. I see other minorities and I am jealous. They get a whole month that celebrates their heritage. Black history month, Asian awareness month. Hispanic awareness month. What do we get? We get ORANGE ALERT!

### **The No-Joke Zone: Airport as Stage**

An interesting outcome of the securitization of society is the ban on jokes at the airport. Making jokes in the security check area at the airport is strictly prohibited and

punishable by law.<sup>99</sup> This particular ban makes airports a unique place in the national space. Airports are the internal borders of the nation. As entry and exit points to the nation, airports provide us a unique perspective on questions of sovereignty and identity. The enforcement of no-joke zones at the airports after the tragedy of 9/11 is thus indicative of the paradoxical connection between the tragic and the comic.

An equally interesting development is the attempt on the part of Muslim ethnic comedians to turn the stage into a symbolic airport space. They do so not only by drawing much of their material from their experiences at the airport but also by literally entering the stage in a mock ritual (anti-rite) of passing through the scanner and being frisked by mock TSA staff. Axis of Evil's famous performance on *Comedy Central* is the best example but not the only one. Similarly, in one of his performances with comedian Rabbi Bob Alper, Azhar Usman and Alper patted one another down as they took turns at the microphone (The two comedians have toured together across the country, doing shows on college campuses and at Muslim and Jewish religious centers. I saw them in Detroit at a Wayne State University program cosponsored by the Muslim Students' Association and Hillel.)

The turning of airports into no-joke zones and the turning of the Muslim comic zone into a symbolic airport are two expressions of a single undercurrent. They are also symptomatic of the Dionysian continuum of fear and laughter or the existential continuity between insecurity and relief. What links the no-joke zone to the comic stage is what links the tragedy of 9/11 to the emergence of Muslim comedy.

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<sup>99</sup> According to a statement released in March 11, 2004, by the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) "in January (2004) a 21-year-old woman was jailed for joking about bombs in her luggage." The TSA Press Office website sternly reminds passengers not to joke at the airport ([http://www.tsa.gov/press/releases/2004/press\\_release\\_0401.shtm](http://www.tsa.gov/press/releases/2004/press_release_0401.shtm)).

## Themes and Audiences

The jokes that Muslim standup comedians make can be classified broadly into two groups: in-group jokes and out-group jokes. In-group jokes require some cultural literacy on the part of the audience. Such jokes are possible only when the out-group, mainstream culture, is used as a background. For example, a joke about Muslims' fear of being caught with one foot in the sink by their employer requires knowledge of Muslim ritual washing before the five daily prayers—but it would not be funny to Muslims living in Muslim societies. This joke is an in-group joke for Muslims who live in a non-Muslim society. The same can be said about one of the jokes by Azeem, another African-American Muslim comedian. When he tells his grandmother, “Grandma, I can’t eat that pork. I’m Muslim,” his grandma says, “No you ain’t! You ain’t never been to jail.” This joke won’t be intelligible to most immigrant Muslims, although it is fully intelligible to indigenous Muslims and even many non-Muslim Americans. To make sense of the joke, one has to be familiar with the experience of Black Muslims or the Nation of Islam and their strong connection to prison ministries.

There is a difference between humor in front of an all-Muslim audience and humor in front of a non-Muslim audience. The latter has a narrower window of encounter (terrorism). Whereas the former can exploit internal issues and differences (e.g., Azhar Usman’s bit about the twenty ways of saying *as salamu alaikum*).

The sphere of jokes that has maximum transparency for a general audience deals mostly with airports and terrorism. With such jokes the Muslim comic disappears into the laughter he or she generates in both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. As one moves

away from this sphere, the mutual transparency diminishes. For example, when Azhar Usman performed in one of Chicago's major stand-up venues before a large non-Muslim audience, many of his jokes failed to generate laughter. One can also speak of a certain 'attention span' which determines the 'shelf life' of a joke. Although with 9/11 Muslim comedians grabbed America's attention, they could not hold that attention for long. The window of opportunity for a Muslim comic is limited to a narrow range of issues and as soon as he runs out of those jokes, the Muslim comic becomes opaque and falls back to the sphere of irrelevant otherness.

Part of the problem seems to be that Muslim comedy is all based on an appeal to commonality with an audience who is assumed to be "the other." The comics often start with a given difference (the stereotype of Muslims as radically different) and try to show similarity. Instead of saying "look, these 'stupid' people think I am this and that, so they are stupid," they usually say "they did this and that thinking I am such and such but look, I am really just like you." Because American society is accustomed to viewing him as outlandish, the "extraordinary" Muslim becomes funny when he does something ordinary (e.g., when the backyard explosion turns out to be a barbecue and not a bomb). This approach is certainly part of turning the symbolic order upside down, but it has a very limited scope.

Now that we have briefly surveyed the landscape of Muslim standup comedy, let us try to make theoretical sense of this comic phenomenon.

## Theories of Comedy

Most of the works on comedy, including extant sociological ones, tend to simply list various theories of comedy, humor and laughter (Morreal 1983, Koller 1988, Berger 1997, Rappoport 2005).<sup>100</sup> In such theories, the role of the context within which ethnic comedy takes place is often neglected. Yet this aspect, I believe, opens the way for a distinctively sociological take on ethnic comedy. Sociological explanation and interpretation thus goes beyond biological and psychological explanations.

Aware of the fact that we laugh at so many diverse situations, scholars of humor have found it “almost impossible to come up with a single formula that would cover all cases of laughter” (Morreal 1983: 1). As a result, what has been circulating in the literature as theories of comedy are actually mid-way classifications (Weberian ideal types) of comic situations. Humor, it seems, does not lend itself to a singular theorization. My task here is more specific and less ambitious than an overall theorization of comedy. What I offer is a sociological theory of ethnic comedy, a theory that appears to be absent in the humor literature in general and sociological studies in particular.

Before presenting my own articulation of a theory of ethnic comedy, let me first briefly describe existing theories of comedy. These theories in many ways complement rather than compete with one another. Nevertheless, one looks in vain to find a convincing integration of them that is distinctively sociological.

The first theory is known as superiority theory. I call this the political explanation. This ancient theory has been around since Plato and Aristotle and was most famously formulated by Hobbes as “sudden glory”. Laughter is seen as a means of expressing

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<sup>100</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I do not distinguish between comedy, humor and laughter. Although there are some nuances in usage, I will not engage in a terminological discussion here due to my special focus on “ethnic comedy” and limitations of space.

superiority over other people. Such laughter can be aggressive and is certainly self-celebratory. For our purposes here, the main insight of the superiority theory of humor is the idea of *relationality* (Bourdieu's discussion of aesthetic judgment in *Distinction* provides a parallel here). Superiority theory acknowledges both power differential and relationality between two parties.

The second and by far more important theory is the incongruity theory. We can comfortably consider this a cultural theory. This theory, which has much greater explanatory power than the first, sees humor as an outcome of inconsistent, unexpected acts and conditions. For example, Pascal, one of the early proponents of this view, argues that "nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees" (Morreal 1983: 16). Similarly Schopenhauer describes laughter as happening in situations marked by "the sudden perception of incongruity between a concept and things themselves" (Schopenhauer 1966: 91). As Morreal puts it, summarizing Schopenhauer's perspective: "what causes laughter is a mismatch between conceptual understanding and perception" (Morreal 1983: 18). Here a concept is general and lumps together unique and particular things as if they were identical instantiations of that concept. All concepts do violence to the uniqueness of the things they claim to represent. This is a problem intrinsic to any abstraction (Nietzsche 2006: 117, Simmel 1950: 63). As such it demands refutation or rectification. One way to cure it is through (comic) treatment. The discrepancy between our mental structures (theories) and the realities of the practical world (facticity) is bridged in the act of laughter. That's why, according to Kierkegaard, what lies at the root of the comic phenomenon is the discrepancy, the contradiction (Kierkegaard 1992: 82). Laughter, one

may argue, is a product of the sudden recognition of this very gap. In this accidental encounter between *practice* (Bourdieu) or *experience* (Simmel) and the *abstract metaphysics*, an everyday version of destruction of metaphysics (what Derrida calls *deconstruction*) takes place. Is not comedy nothing but a comic deconstruction?

The third prominent theory of humor is called the relief theory. A psychological theory, relief theory is best formulated in the approach of Sigmund Freud. Relief theory emphasizes the cathartic release from repression. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explores the psychic cost of civilization (i.e., society) for individuals. He identifies the overwhelming power and expansion of *reality principle* over *pleasure principle* as the main cause for the unhappiness of modern man (Freud 1961: 22). In comedy the relationship is reversed. We revert to the pleasure principle, albeit temporarily. In his discussion of jokes, Freud also links jokes to the unconscious and draws attention to the economy of psychic energy in the repression of emotions (the id) by the superego. “In ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ (1900) and ‘Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,’” Freud argues that the “manifest content of dreams and jokes yield pleasure through their disguised expression of unconscious wishes, resulting in partial lifting of repression and an economic expenditure of psychic energy” (Bergmann 1999: 3).

The closest to sociological perspectives on comedy are those provided by cultural anthropologists. Mary Douglas in particular draws attention to the importance of context in making sense of comic experience. The funniness of jokes depends on the context in which they are deployed (Douglas 1975). Both Mary Douglas and Victor Turner (1969), two prominent anthropologists working within the Durkheimian tradition, therefore

rightly point to the margins and to liminality as the location of humor. Comedy is an anti-rite presented in a ritual, an anti-structure imagined as an alternative structure. Let me clarify these two points. Comedy turns the world upside down by showing the audience the view from the other side. The majority's vision (structure) is temporarily and imaginarily relegated to the status of anti-structure while the minority's vision (anti-structure) is elevated to the status of structure. In this reversal of symbolic order, the minority is released from social classifications (e.g., stereotypes) and the majority is given the opportunity to feel like the minority (Douglas 1975: 103, Berger 1997: 72).

The idea of reversal of symbolic order is of crucial importance for understanding the structural dimensions of ethnic comedy. Often perceived as a reversal of the relationship between the rational and the irrational, comic vision does indeed thrive on the discrepancies and interplay of two forces. For Nietzsche, these two forces were the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. The former is associated with structure, rationality and seriousness and the latter with anti-structure, emotions and laughter (one cannot but remember Nietzsche's *Gay Science* as a revolt against rationalism). Both Plato in his cave metaphor and Nietzsche in his Dionysian language invite us to such a reversal of the order. This Dionysian element in Greek tradition is continued by the Roman festival of Saturnalia (Nietzsche 2006: 122) and extends into the present day in the many versions of Carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin famously observed that in carnivals and other rites of passage, the ordinary world is turned upside down (Bakhtin 1968, Brottman 2004: 150, Berger 1997: 21). Laughter is therefore "one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole.... It is a peculiar point of view relative to the world... Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Bakhtin 1968: 20).



An important insight of the scholarship on the comic phenomenon is the idea that it is a particular *worldview*. Comic vision reveals a reality different from commonsense reality. It is thus a “worldview” in two senses: it reveals another world and it is the ability to see differently. The comic vision’s ability to reveal reality is a theme that deserves further discussion.

In a famous piece, “On Multiple Realities,” Alfred Schutz distinguishes between commonsense reality (“the paramount reality of the everyday life”) and other realities (“finite provinces of meaning”) (Schutz 1962: 207). We leap from one world into another when we start to daydream, for example. Or we slip into another when we fall asleep.

Here, commonsense reality is objective in that it is shared by multiple social actors and is thoroughly sedimented in the language and everyday symbolic structures. Other realities, however, remain subjective and partial. The comic as an alternative reality transcends the reality of the ordinary and is capable of seeing things from a certain distance. What is crucial here is the relationship between *vision* and *distance*. Those who are in a condition of seeing things differently are more likely to generate humor. Behind the large body of Jewish humor lies the Jewish experience of marginality vis-à-vis societies in which they lived (Rappoport 2005: 66, Berger 1997: xvii). Simmel’s famous social type, *the stranger*, represents this ability to be both near and far and to be able to stay attached to the mainstream vision and withdraw back to the ethnic vision (Simmel 1971: 143-148).

## **A Phenomenological Theory of Ethnic Comedy**

As noted earlier, theoretical works on comedy—let alone ethnic comedy—are few and far between. The volumes upon volumes of popular books on ethnic comedy, not surprisingly, do not have a theoretical agenda (Lowe 1986). Unfortunately, the few sociological treatments of comedy that do exist (Koller 1988) are not particularly theoretical. John Morreal’s alternative to existing theories (humor as “pleasant psychological shift”) still remains psychological (Morreal 1983: 38). Even Peter Berger, who is fully equipped with the insights of phenomenological sociology, somehow leaves the sociological dimension of comedy undertheorized in his otherwise very original and entertaining book (Berger 1997). As others have noted (Fine 1998: 383), a sociological discussion of comedy needs to combine the different theories of comedy which have been developed from non-sociological perspectives and then go beyond them.

In this part of my discussion, I propose a sociological theory of ethnic comedy. My aim is to build a structural framework for understanding the comic phenomenon. In this endeavor, I draw on Simmel’s distinction between *subjective* and *objective* cultures. In his writings on the crisis of modern culture, he argues that in modern times we are experiencing a cultural crisis because the equilibrium between *subjective culture* and *objective culture* has been lost (Simmel 1971: 227-234, Simmel 1997). What Simmel says about the relationship between the individual and modern society can be said as well of the relationship between (ethnic) minorities and (national) majorities. In the beginning, a minority group’s subjective culture (an internal culture) has not yet been harmonized or synchronized with the objective culture, a culture which is external to them. The discrepancy between their subjective culture and the (objective) culture of the majority

gives rise to incongruities and becomes a fertile ground for humor. Simmel's objective and subjective cultures correspond to Alfred Schutz's categories of "paramount reality" (i.e., everyday reality) and "finite provinces of meaning" respectively.

The relationship between the new minority and the majority, to use the terms of figurationist sociologist Norbert Elias, is the relationship between *the established* and *the outsider* (Elias 1994). In the following outline of a theory of ethnic comedy I add a phenomenological dimension to the combined insights of Simmel and Elias.<sup>101</sup> In addition to the relative *power* and *relationality* of parties that are central to the arguments of Simmel and Elias, I introduce two considerations of context. Location and temporality are two indispensable elements in making sense of the rise and disappearance of ethnic comedy.<sup>102</sup> This rise and later disappearance of ethnic comedy is also an instance of the emergence of a group charisma and its later routinization.

Let me start with the most basic condition of possibility for ethnic comedy. There has to be *two different visions*: the vision of the (ethnic or religious) minority and that of the majority. These are not the same. Had they been the same, we would not be able to speak of a minority and a majority, which are residual categories of each other. By vision, here, I am referring to a situated perspective and a particular perception of reality. The space for stereotypes is opened by the discrepancy between these two visions or perceptions of reality. It is the difference between a group's self-perception and the way the group is perceived by others. Otherwise, prejudices would not stay as prejudice but

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<sup>101</sup> It is worth noting that the theoretical affinities between Simmel and Elias are not accidental. Elias (together with Kurt H. Wolff) was a student of Karl Mannheim, who in turn was a student of Simmel.

<sup>102</sup> As Randall Collins points out, "Sociological theory does not pay enough attention to the dynamics of processes over time. We tend to be stuck in a meta-theoretical dichotomy between static comparisons of how structures hang together and an actor-centered view of fluid action. But processes have shapes in time, patterns of intensity, rapid shifts, and gradual declines, which sweep people up at one moment and bring them down at another" (Collins 2004: 53).

would become correct judgments. That is to say, when the gap between the two visions—between stereotype and reality—is fully bridged, both ethnicity and comedy disappear. If so, when does ethnic comedy emerge?

People usually don't make fun of people about whom they know nothing (hence there are no American jokes about Peruvians or Uzbeks). For ethnic jokes to emerge there has to be some *contact*. Real or imaginary, experiential or abstract, it is this contact that first opens the door for typification and opinion-formation. But if the group is known too well and fully assimilated, we cannot speak of *ethnic* comedy either. Assimilation in this case means not the disappearance of group identity, but the loss of "stranger" status. The temporality that flattens a joke (especially when it is told a third time) also flattens the ethnicity of a group as it gradually moves from outsider to insider position. Ethnic humor, therefore, is by definition an intracultural or subcultural phenomenon. We don't have German ethnic comedy in America any longer. Instead we have jokes about Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Indo-Pakistanis. Such new ethnicities are usurping the visibility that once belonged to Italians, Poles and Irish. In short, ethnic comedy emerges when the ethnic group is like an iceberg in relation to the majority. The tip of the iceberg represents the zone of familiarity and contact. It has to be big enough. The part under the water represents the zone of unfamiliarity and exclusivity. In the beginning the iceberg is under the water and there is no ethnic comedy. When its tip surfaces (a form of intrusion) and catches attention, it generates comedy. But when its body is fully displayed it loses its magic (i.e., ethnic and comic character), it starts to melt away, if we are to follow up on our metaphor here.

Therefore, the ethnic group in question first of all has to acquire a relevant otherness. Irrelevant otherness does not generate jokes. It is the combination of otherness and relevance (the terrorists lurking among us, the Mexican worker in our neighborhood, the Pakistani computer engineer in the next cubicle) that generates jokes. Ethnic comedy is made across a boundary that separates us (majority) from them (minority). When that boundary is erased (including through comedy itself), otherness evaporates, despite continuing relevance. And so does the ethnic comedy that clings to it.

When both groups share the same vision, their comedy is no longer “ethnic.” It is the gap between the two visions that makes each one funny *from the other’s point of view*.<sup>103</sup> But when the object of comedy in one world (i.e. a minority’s internal joke) lacks a counterpart or resonance on the other side, it will not appear funny. One can think of in-group jokes by Muslim comedians that fail to generate laughter among audiences unfamiliar with Muslim culture. All funniness is subjective and can exist only for and according to a particular point of view, situated in place and time. No joke is “objectively” funny. An act or joke, always situated in place and time, is comical only *to* someone. This is similar to the role of intentionality in phenomenological theory, which holds that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. This directedness is part of the comic experience. Something that looks incongruous and thus funny from one vantage point might look congruous and un-funny from another. Although as Heidegger points out we are always already “in the world,” still we have to start from somewhere. Later expansions of horizon and accumulation of knowledge are pathways opened from that starting point. Comedy “occurs” as one moves along (i.e., opens up) that pathway.

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<sup>103</sup> Bourdieu, in his *The Weight of the World*, for example, shows how people of different class and location backgrounds have incongruent views of the world (Bourdieu et al 2000).

To the extent that different people's pathways overlap (in the form of common sense, doxa), they share a highway of everyday language and a collective attunement toward what might occur, be it comic or tragic.

The degree of humor diminishes as you move away from the overlapping areas or contact zones of mutuality, toward the exclusive domains (Figure 6.1). In that regard, comedy is similar to aesthetic experience. It introduces the unseen, the unknown, surprise. The performance of ethnic comedy on stage is a collaboration in routinization of the charismatic. The ineluctable, the strange and incongruous particular is tamed, normalized, and neutralized under (and *toward*) the universal familiar. Ethnic comedy is unfamiliarity packaged in a box of familiarity, a glimpse of charisma before it is routinized. That is why its delivery must be partial and gradual, so that it can be digested mentally and perceptually. It is also why the creator of ethnic jokes himself does not laugh at them: because they are not unfamiliar to him anymore. And for the same reason, most pieces of humor will have their full effect on an audience only once (because the joke exists only *in statu nascendi*). This rule holds not only for jokes, but for ethnic groups as well. Length-of-stay in American society, for example, is important because those who come later are likely to be the butt of jokes. This is best illustrated in the thriving sub-genre (among many ethnic communities, including Muslims) of "boater" jokes—humor at the expense of those "fresh off the boat."

The work of comedy is therefore aesthetic. In the aesthetic experience we come across a surface which has been experienced but not yet conceptualized. Let me explain this point using Heideggerian terminology, which I am afraid itself often begs explanation— but his writings on the work of art are of particular relevance here.

Heidegger defines art “as the becoming and happening of truth” because “art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical” (Heidegger 1971: 69, 75). Ancient Greeks used the word *techne* to describe craft and art. In their world, Heidegger believes, art (*techne*) and truth (*alethia*) belonged together.<sup>104</sup>

The artist or comedian is someone who makes “truth as unconcealment” (*alethia*) happen. As a form of art, comedy is similar to poetry. “Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten [i.e., routinized -MB] and therefore used-up poem” (Heidegger 1971: 205). As a result of this aesthetic incorporation of a foreign/new element, the language (i.e., culture) expands. Hence, the comedian is an artist, a Dionysian poet who brings forth new manifestations of being. The comic’s magic lies in the ability to pull us into an experience which lies beyond our conceptualized world of familiarity. In short, like all aesthetic experiences, comedy has both otherness (unfamiliarity) and relevance.

Of course, one question that comes to mind is: why should the majority care about such comedy? Or to put it another way, what is it that links the two groups? What connects the two groups is *care* and *concern*. Here I use the concept of care in a Heideggerian sense, as the specifically human mode of being (Heidegger 1962: 225). It can be positive as in love and care or negative as in fear and anxiety. Care and concern delimit the surface of relevance<sup>105</sup> and the zone of objects and themes. These objects and themes become the raw material for comedy. They can be taken up by an ethnic

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<sup>104</sup> Heidegger argues that “the word *techne* denotes rather a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present, as such. For Greek thought the nature of knowing consists in *alethia*, that is, in the uncovering of beings. *Techne*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* present beings as such beings *out of* concealedness” (Heidegger 1971: 75).

<sup>105</sup> Alfred Schutz also pays particular attention to the importance of *relevance* in the constitution of our (multiple) worlds (Schutz 1962).

comedian to poke fun at the majority or by the majority to ridicule the minority. Fear and anxiety are similar to love and care in producing themes and objects of (selective) perception. Care and concern bring the other under our radar. The fear of the Muslim as a potential terrorist is precisely what creates room for him in the world of non-Muslims and thus opens the ground for Muslim comedy. Azhar Usman's description of his experience at the airport starts with the fact that as soon as he steps into the airport "heads turn simultaneously." A Muslim who could otherwise be completely ignored takes on charisma, albeit a negative charisma. Even when other citizens fail to pay attention to the Muslim individual, the airport announcements invite them to turn their radars on and search for suspicious behavior.<sup>106</sup> In the face of such concern— whether naturally arising or artificially provoked— space is opened up for Muslims in the world of the average American.

Because the Muslim entered the American imagination (most forcefully, in both senses of the word) through the hijacking of planes, the most effective jokes non-Muslim audiences hear from Muslim comedians are jokes that happen to be about aviation and airport security. Such jokes are fully transparent and make perfect sense to the non-Muslim audience. They correspond to the tip of the iceberg.

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<sup>106</sup> Azhar Usman describes this experience with an almost existentialist punch line: "My least favorite thing about being comedian is all these traveling. That is right. The moment I have to walk to the airport. Heads are turned simultaneously. The security (officers speak: ... we got Mohammad at 4 o'clock). Can I see your ID please. Later, of course, the worst thing is that they constantly repeat: "Please report any suspicious activity, please report any suspicious individuals." Well, I am at the airport at this corner. I thought I saw this guy. He looks shady. I called the security guy, he said " Sir, you are looking at the mirror." Here Usman takes on the gaze/vision of the majority (the objective culture, that's, majority's subjective culture) and sees himself as an other. As himself (Azhar-in-himself) he sees the anxiety and gaze of the others but when he participates in the act of seeing like the majority, he turns himself into an object. Reflection in the mirror reflects the objectified subject. Azhar's joke is also Lacanian in pointing to a mirror stage for Muslim ethnic selfhood in America.



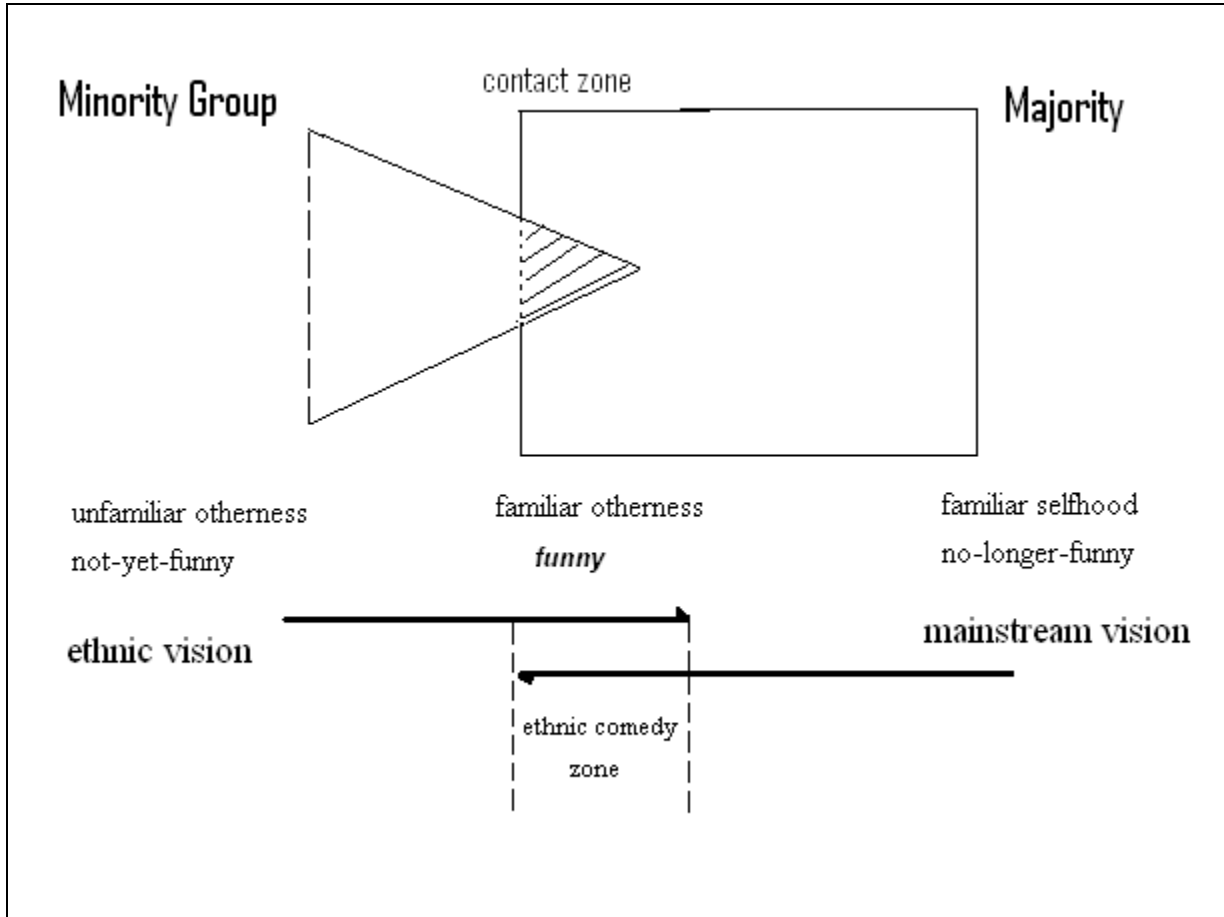


Figure 7.1: The iceberg model of ethnic comedy.

In other words, in the mutually engaged routinization of the new object, each vision is influenced and transformed by the other. We can therefore speak of a comic “surrender and catch,” a phrase Kurt Wolff devised to describe our immersion in experience and withdrawal to analytical objectification (Wolff 1991). This is also similar to the idea of pre-conceptual experience in Simmel and certainly the Dionysian element in Nietzsche. In the comic encounter, the ethnic comedian and his audience play Wittgensteinian “language-games.” A specific experience (strangeness) is baptized into normality through mutual witnessing. At the very moment of linguistic expression of a

life experience (what Wittgenstein himself calls *life forms* (Wittgenstein 1997)), language expands beyond its earlier limits. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant, along the same lines, defines beauty as the object of representation *without concepts* (Kant 1987: 53). It is the sighting of previously unseen surfaces that amazes and amuses us.

Taking in a stereotype and giving back a joke not only produces laughter, which is a spark of the merging of two visions, but also has a leveling effect on people and their understandings. The subjective and objective cultures which are expressed by the two visions approach a certain balance, transparency, and correspondence under the jurisdiction of the comic operation.<sup>107</sup>

In my theory of ethnic comedy, I attempt to integrate the three otherwise separate theories of comedy: superiority, incongruity and relief theories. Here centrality goes to incongruity theory and it remains the backbone of the model discussed above. However, it is supplemented by the relational and cathartic insights of the other two theories. Furthermore, my theory is phenomenological and pays particular attention to questions of time and space.

First, superiority theory provides the otherness necessary for the possibility of vision from the other side. The incongruity theory posits two visions of reality in a structural relationship that produces comedy. Finally, relief theory refers to the tension between these two visions. The comic relief is generated by the gradual fusion of these visions which produces sparks of laughter. The integration of the three theories would not be sufficient for our model, had we not included elements of space and time. The question of situated perspectives and different visions are absolutely central for such a

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<sup>107</sup> We can appropriate the notion of “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 2004) here as “fusion of visions”. The fusion of visions happens when the “events” (i.e., the facticity generated by 9/11) are given meaning through interpretation.

theory building. Similarly, we have to recognize that not only a single joke but also the whole phenomenon of ethnic comedy is a temporal event. Muslim ethnic comedy is a product of a particular time (after 9/11) and place (in relation to American mainstream).

As a temporal event ethnic comedy is a symptom of integration. The coming-closer which gives rise to jokes and the consequent attrition of otherness eventually lead to incorporation. We are of course talking about domestic ethnic comedy and more specifically ethnic comedy in American society. (Comedy that pokes fun at external groups such as other nationalities has a different trajectory and as such is not part of this analysis.)

### **Ethnic Comedy and Cultural Citizenship**

Given that comedy is both culture-specific and very local, is there an American Muslim culture which can produce its own comic manifestation? After all, ethnic comedy proceeds from ethnic culture. Muslim ethnic comedy in the United States is a symptom of the emergence of a Muslim ethnicity in America. One sees the signs of this process in the character of Muslim comedy. There is a Muslim in-group humor and a humor that is presented to outsiders or mixed audiences. The Muslim comedy that appears on stage has a very short shelf life. It is so perishable because the window of recognition for Muslims within the landscape of American society is still small and confined to terrorism and aviation. Over the last couple of years, my observation has been that Muslim comics are expanding their spectrum of jokes as they try to reach larger audiences. Presidential campaigns and national politics offer one such avenue.

Nevertheless, there is a more crucial point with respect to Americanization. As others have argued, ethnic humor is part of the Americanization process (Lowe 1986: 19). Muslim comedy existed as an immigrant ethnic comedy and as an in-group phenomenon prior to 9/11. However, pan-Muslim ethnic comedy, which is best illustrated by *Allah Made Me Funny*, is a by-product of 9/11, where the outsider audience is pulled into the theater of Muslim comedy. Such comedy also benefits from a trend triggered by 9/11 known as “Muslim first” (Naber 2005). Being Muslim became the primary identification for many Muslim ethnicities. Muslimness provides a larger community and visible victimhood that generates recognition. Pan-Muslim ethnic comedy addresses this new audience.

One of the functions of ethnic comedy is as a form of cultural mediation (Mintz 1985: 71). But it takes place within a “time bubble” (Collins 2004) and is closely linked to the life chances of the ethnic group in question. Not only an individual joke but also the entire ethnic humor of a particular group has a temporal character. If repetition of a joke blunts its power and newness, so does prolonged encounter with an ethnic/religious group blunt ethnic comedy, because it saps its otherness and unfamiliarity. That which is familiar is no longer incongruent.<sup>108</sup>

Ethnic comedy or the comic operation as a form of interaction is a cultural *stitch*. What happens in ethnic comedy is that the comedian takes a stereotype (a synthetic form produced by the objective culture of the majority) and plays on it (adds to it his subjective culture, his concrete facticity) and finally gives it back to society through laughter. It is no wonder that ethnic comedy is often celebrated for its “healing” capacity. It soothes

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<sup>108</sup> What remains is actually mainstream comedy still labeled as ethnic as in the case of Jewish and African-American comedy in the United States, where the ideas of mainstream and ethnic become hard to disentangle.

people. By undoing otherness, ethnic comedy lifts, albeit temporarily, the restrictive limits on the self and abolishes the gulf that separates the in-group from the out-group. It provides a relief from social classifications, which are often oppressive of the minority group. As such it is also a psychoanalytical operation: it makes one's own what was once perceived as external. The self is redeployed in such a way that it now includes the former other. Boundaries are blurred. How does this inclusion happen? The ability of comedy to disclose the rock bottom of our identities as "human" plays a significant role in showing commonality under the surface of "difference." That comedy reveals our humanity is well illustrated by a statement by Jewish comic Rabbi Bob Alper, who said after his performance with Azhar Usman in Detroit in April 1, 2008, "You can't hate the person you've laughed with." One of the reactions Usman said he received from a non-Muslim audience during his tour across America is similarly worth quoting: "I didn't see you as a Muslim, I saw you as a human being."

## **Conclusion**

The tragedy of 9/11 focused America's attention on the Muslim minority. It created unprecedented visibility. It also opened up the space for Muslim comedy. After all, Muslim ethnic comedy is exploiting that attention in a way that is beneficial to both parties. Laughing about the ways of Muslim people in America helps blur the lines that separate Muslims from other Americans. Its basic message is that we are all human. It shows that Muslims are not that different from the rest of humanity and therefore merit compassion and understanding.

The ironic humor which characterizes Muslim comedy “acknowledges certain de-humanizing, life-threatening circumstances and seeks to transform them into something human” (Koller 1988: 10). If humor is a distortion of reality, those whose reality is already distorted by stereotypes must resort to humor to rectify them. Humor becomes a means of undoing otherness. By re-humanizing Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslim Americans, Muslim comedy heals the effects of the neurosis triggered by 9/11 which has left Muslims outside the definition of the nation. The very crisis that cast Muslims away from the American mainstream becomes a means of re-integrating them. Muslim comedy provides another instance of what I have elsewhere called “negative incorporation.” Finally, Muslim ethnic comedy is a symptom of Muslims’ Americanization. It reflects the emergence of a distinct American Muslim ethnicity as a product of American experience.

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion: American Life and Muslim Forms

#### Community and Crisis

Discrimination against Muslims and their growing exclusion in the aftermath of 9/11 have forged a distinct American Muslim identity out of a plethora of ethnic, racial and diasporic groups. The crisis has given a history, an orientation, in short a relative coherence to the otherwise fragmented Muslims of the United States. This coherence has been a painful one: while 9/11 has given Muslims a common ground and unprecedented public visibility, they have come at a high cost in human suffering.

Insofar as one can allow sweeping generalizations, 9/11 has opened a wide track of integration. I call this path to integration *negative incorporation*. By placing Muslims (or more precisely, the imaginary or real threat emanating from them) front and center, 9/11 forced Americans to think about and deal with Islam in their conversations around the dinner table, in the glare of the mass media and under the scrutiny of government agencies. One consequence of 9/11 for the larger public was that it put Muslims on the agenda. It sensitized the law and classificatory systems to Muslim identity by forcing Muslims to make pleas to multiple audiences: to the law, to other faith communities, and to a general sense of humanity. Another consequence for Muslims themselves is that it

accelerated the autonomization of American Islam from its imaginary or real origins elsewhere (e.g., in the Middle East).

### **Origins of Values**

An interesting turn of events is that 9/11 has placed Muslims, most of whom are newcomers to America, in the forefront of the struggle for civil rights in contemporary American society. Muslims have found themselves speaking the language of law and rights in ways that look almost awkward. As if they were freshmen in a school that grants a degree in human and civil rights. Yet it is a school whose graduating cohorts may well have forgotten the lessons they once learned. In any case, Muslims nowadays speak the language of American law and universal human rights. It puts them in an, at times, uneasy alliance with progressive groups such as homosexuals, feminists and anti-war activists. Muslims often have ambivalent feelings towards their new friends. At a time when they desperately need to build alliances, they are torn between such progressive groups and the conservative discourses of morality and family values. Muslims might find themselves caught up in the debate over abortion, normally a very marginal and unpoliticized theme in the Muslim imagination. Are we going to see a situation where every Muslim happens to be a liberal (as with earlier Jewish and Catholic cohorts)? Or will we see Muslims closing ranks around an American identity defined by conservative values?

Values arise out of experience. They do not, as we tend to think, circulate as universally acceptable and appreciable norms. As Hans Joas notes, “Our commitment to values is based on our experiences, not our knowledge of them.” The ease and eagerness



with which American Muslims approach democracy is a case in point. American Muslim experience challenges the conclusions that assume an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democracy.

The implications of American Muslims' apparent success in articulating a harmony between Islam and democratic values are not merely theoretical. Once they gain self-confidence, American Muslims may become an important agent in influencing the discourse of the Muslim world. Indeed, they could become a new marketing force for domestic American values at a time when America's own foreign policy experts have long since lost interest, if they ever had it, in promoting democracy in the Muslim world.

### **Muslim Life in American Forms**

Second generation and convert Muslims frequently distinguish between "cultural Islam" and "true Islam," or more generally between "culture" and "religion". I always find this distinction to be a powerful discursive device. It allows them to dissociate what they consider "pure Islam" or the "essence of religion" from the cultural forms and practices associated with it. A religious Muslim woman criticizing the patriarchal practices of not-so-religious immigrant parents or an African American imam ridiculing the Saudi Arabian policy of not allowing women to drive are just two examples. This immanent critique is not unique to American Muslims. Islam has crossed many cultural boundaries through such constant re-interpretation, a point that most of the current calls for reform in Islam seem to miss.

My research on Islam in America has shown me that context considerably skews the content. This of course is no news to students of the sociology of knowledge or

adherents to the constructionist view of reality. But here I would like to draw attention to something more specific. Islam is not rebuilt anew in America. It draws upon the same vocabulary of Islamic images and symbols available everywhere, but it emphasizes different words of that vocabulary. Dormant concepts are revitalized, while some active elements may be put to sleep. This happens at an unconscious level, in response to the social and historical environment. Let me give a few examples.

The figure of Abraham, who is unavoidably present in Muslim ritual prayers but yet does not occupy a central place in Muslim self-perception, gains centrality in American Muslim discourse. In a similar vein, many Muslims would say that the legacy of Muslim Spain does not necessarily represent the high point of Muslim religious history. For many Muslims (certainly the orthodox), it can very well be seen as a period of degeneration. Not because Muslims do not value the pluralism and religious tolerance of that period, but because that dimension is not their main criterion. In Muslim contact zones, whether in America or elsewhere, such elements gain new relevance and importance. Or sometimes non-issues like abortion and homosexuality (both of them mainly ignored in classical Muslim legal discourses) become hot issues. In yet another case, parallels are drawn between the frontier cultures of Western Islam (then Spain, now Europe and America), as if the Muslim owl of Andalusia had taken off from medieval times and landed in contemporary America. So a Muslim educational center in Virginia calls itself the University of Cordoba, and a multimedia company, a subdivision of the Zaytuna Institute in California, is named AlHambra Productions. Muslim parents in America name their sons Ibrahim, Joseph, and Adam and their daughters Maryam and Sarah (but not Hagar). As I noted in the chapter on the direction to Mecca, some early

Muslim immigrants in Dearborn met for prayer on Sundays. Today Muslims are debating the difficulties they face because of the lunar calendar. The conflict between the indeterminacy of the lunar year and the rhythms of capitalist lifestyle in America, which requires planning and scheduling, forces Muslims to adopt a scientific form of moonsighting in place of the “organic” one, where holidays begin with a new moon seen by the naked eye. Muslim temporality in America remains an unresolved problem.

Muslim life or habitus is a composite of boundary-forming, constitutive beliefs and values. The conditions of deployment of those beliefs and values depend on the context of their practice. When a Muslim immigrant relocates to America, this composite structure melts, but only partially. The old boundaries, no longer supported, turn into empty shells, while new boundaries cut through formerly uninterrupted areas. This whole process is the outpouring of a life, which so far has been contained in one form, into another. The process has temporal and spatial dimensions and takes place at both individual and communal levels. What I have called empty shells, the corpses of earlier form, are deconstructed by the children of immigrants through such distinctions as “cultural Islam” versus “pure Islam.”

My point is this: Muslim life is being poured into an American mold. A new metaphysics of relevance and irrelevance punctuates the historical shape that American Islam takes today. The forms that press themselves onto Muslim life as a result of various crises all contribute to the formation of a Muslim identity specific to America. The pain of discrimination mingles with the joys of freedom, and the fear spurred by Islamophobia joins with Muslim comedy in shaping that identity.

## **Contributions**

The fate of this study is similar to that of its subject. The religious minority I studied is neither immigrant only nor convert only. Similarly this study is neither sociology of religion only nor immigration studies only. In this section, I will briefly touch upon some of the contributions this dissertation has aimed to make.

I have drawn sociological attention to the airport as a site of identity and a rite of passage. Sociologists need to pay more attention to this long neglected space in which we all spend increasingly more time.

My discussion of *qibla* in Chapter 2 is a contribution to the study of direction as a sub-field of space. More work needs to be done on this specific form of relationship between Muslims and with their spatial environments.

In discussing the complicated nature of membership in contemporary liberal societies, I have highlighted the concept of cultural citizenship. The cultural dimension of membership in a polity is dependent on both state and nation, on the market as well as on the community. Cultural citizenship goes beyond legal entitlements and sheds light on the psychic and everyday symbolic dimensions of membership in society. Furthermore, in exploring the multiple dimensions of citizenship as belonging, I have thematized inward processes as well as outward processes of citizenship.

I believe that my discussion has underscored the relevance of temporality and context for understanding citizenship. Against abstract universalism and its claims of equality, a situated look at the protective mantle of citizenship reveals holes, tears and uneven surface in the reality of citizenship.

I have also developed some theoretical insights. I have drawn attention to negative charisma, a neglected dimension of Weberian “pure charisma.” In this way I have sought to link Weber and Turner as theorists of positive and negative charisma respectively. As my discussion has shown, charisma is not an exclusive property of individuals. Groups and spaces such as the Kaaba can also assume charisma.

I have also distinguished between two types of symbolic violence: constitutive and repressive. These are past and present experiences of symbolic violence. In Bourdieu’s language, the first of my types of symbolic violence is habitus; the second corresponds to his symbolic violence. By making this distinction, I have re-interpreted and expanded Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic violence in a way that sheds new light on his other concepts. While I rely on some of Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs, I hope that my discussion has provided an implicit critique of Bourdieu’s reductionism, which translates everything to power. The centrality he gives to power is both very modern (western) and French (centralist).

I hope that I have contributed to the revival of phenomenological sociology, a tradition whose richness has not been sufficiently appreciated. Symbolic interactionism is certainly not the only possible sociological appropriation of the phenomenological tradition in philosophy. I make the call for a new appropriation of phenomenology for sociological purposes partly because I believe phenomenological sociology is particularly useful in making sense of cultural conditions that involve non-Western worlds.

By drawing on Simmel and Heidegger, I have defended the primacy of experience in the development of values. My discussion of the transformation of Muslim discourses on America provides a detailed illustration of how values arise as a result of experience.

Most classical sociologists were either philosophers or legal scholars. Today sociology seems to have forgotten these origins. I hope that this work has partly achieved one of its clandestine desires: re-linking philosophy and sociology.

In a close encounter with ethnic comedy, I would like to think that I have produced a phenomenologically informed sociological theory of ethnic comedy.

I have offered some preliminary insights into what I call *agonistic sociology*, where anomie, charisma and life are not treated as residuals but as starting points. This point has been previously made by Norbert Elias—but only with respect to anomie—in his critique of Merton’s misinterpretation of Durkheim. I suggest that we should extend this critique to the treatment of charisma and utter neglect of “life,” a Simmelian category.

Unlike most (backlash) studies on the impact of 9/11 on American Muslims, I have explored the positive consequences of those tragic events. My investigation reveals the ways in which 9/11 has accelerated the formation of a distinctly American Muslim identity that defines itself in greater autonomy from the rest of the Muslim world.

The field of American Muslim studies is a new one and there are many areas yet to be explored. Such areas of interest for future research include Muslim politicians in the U.S. Congress, questions of Muslim temporality and calendar, the development of sharia-compliant finance, practices and institutions of halal certification, Islamic fashion and lifestyle magazines, chaplaincy programs, and expanding media universes (including online Muslim communities).

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