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A Search for the “True Islam”
How Muslim Youth Work to Decouple Culture and Religion

I. Introduction

“Muslim” like any identity marker is fluid and open to a number of interpretations. However, historical and political tensions, namely the post-9/11 environment of the United States has made the “Muslim identity” a unique phenomenon in the ongoing era of the United States’ globalization and ongoing “war on terror” (Sayyid 2014). As of 2017, there are an estimated 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States today (Mohamed 2018). Of this group, approximately one third (35%) of U.S Muslims are between the age of 18 and 29 years compared to the overall U.S. adult population in which youth make up only 21% (U.S; Pew Research 2017). Since influxes of diverse immigrant populations entered the United States following the reforms of 1965, academic scholarship has explored how Muslims, especially Muslim youth, reconcile their religion and cultural heritage with their predominantly Western and non-Muslim majority environments. More recently, scholars have situated their studies in the post-9/11 environment in the United States as a critical event prompting Muslims to re-evaluate their identity and learn more about their faith in the wake up growing questions and prejudice by the dominant non-Muslim community. However, little scholarship has taken into account *internal* factors that contribute to the formation of Muslim identity. Moreover, previous studies were conducted in the years following the aftermath of 9/11 may not be the most accurate portrayal of the challenges and experiences of second and third generation Muslims today.

Rather, and as this paper argues, the growing diversity of the Muslim *ummah*, or community, has presented a different set of obstacles for American Muslim youth as they search and try to understand the “True Islam”.

This research explores how young Muslims internalize, understand, and reconcile with competing interpretations of Islam in the diverse *ummah* of the United States. This ethnographic study is intended to contribute to the understanding of Muslim youth identity construction in the United States among foreign and second-generation Muslims. In addition, the inclusion of foreign participants (i.e. non U.S citizens) included in the sample provide added insight to how temporary relocation affects religious identity, a phenomenon relatively absent in existing scholarship. Finally, this investigation broadens the sociological understanding of religious identity construction and inter-generational differences between immigrant and second-generation Muslims in Western contexts. I begin with providing an overview of how previous scholarship has approached the study of religious identity construction among Western Muslims followed by an overview of my research setting and methods. Following, I present three factors to identity construction among Muslim youth: (i) origins of questioning, (ii) mechanisms for a ‘self-authored search,’ and (iii) shared Islamic ethics. I conclude by arguing that the pluralism and competing understandings and practices of Islam pose the greatest challenge in the identity construction of Muslim youth and discuss how this finding both compliments and diverges from existing scholarship in the post-9/11 context.

II. Literature Review

American-Muslim or Muslim American? Crafting the Muslim Identity in the United States

Historically, scholarship on American Muslims contends that the American experience for Muslim Americans have “forged” and “forced” new Muslim identities as a result as being depicted as “the other” (Haddad 2000, p. 29). The 1965 U.S Immigration Act that repealed immigration quotas from the 1920s that predominantly favored Western European and predominantly Judeo-Christian immigrant populations is often cited as the beginning of the diverse religious landscape of the United States today. In response, the impact of immigration on religious identities has received scholarly attention, specifically the identity modifications prompted from the shift from majority to minority religious status (Yang and Ebaugh 2001).

Several sociological studies have found that religion plays an important role for maintaining solidarity and group identity for immigrants. Ammerman (2003) posits, “[the] circumstances and demands in a new culture inevitably shape the beliefs and practices that were taken for granted in a home country” (p. 208). For instance, Kurien (2001) finds that for Indian Muslim and Hindu immigrants alike, religion becomes more salient for individuals to sustain their immigrant ethnicity. In addition, immigrant communities use religion as a means for communal support networks for material, psychological, and social benefits (Peek, 2005, p. 219). For the reasons highlighted above, immigrant populations tend to show increased religious participation upon arriving in the United States. Peek (2005) frames this phenomenon in the context of identity salience defined as one aspect of identity, such as being Muslim, has greater importance in the hierarchy of one’s “multiple identities that comprise a sense of self” (p. 217). Although increased commitment to their faith has been prevalent among the Muslim

community following 1965, the aftermath of 9/11 is often cited as an event that further increased the salience of religious identity for many American Muslims.

Muslim Identity in the Face of Adversity: The Effects of September 11th

Religion, especially in an environment perceived as discriminatory can act as a form of identity resistance (Ameli 2002, pp. 76-80). This phenomenon historically has been the case in many post-colonial contexts and more recently, studies of Muslims in the United States post-9/11. Increased religious salience in the face of adversity can be understood by two overarching explanations. First, following September 11th, 2001, several Muslims were asked questions about their religious beliefs and practices by their non-Muslim American counterparts. To better field these inquires, Muslims were prompted to learn more about Islam which strengthened their religious identities as a result (Peek, 2005, p. 231). Second and in line with the literature on perceived group threat and solidarity, the events of 9/11 brought Muslims closer with their religious communities and further reinforced their faith (pp. 233 – 234). In response, scholars situate their empirical investigations in the post-9/11 context. One such example is Peek (2005),¹ who classifies three stages of religious identity: (i) *ascribed*, (ii) *chosen*, and (iii) *declared*. Peek argues that as Muslims move from one stage to the next, their faith and religious practice increase and become more intense (p. 223). In her ethnographic study, the majority of participants entered the final *declared* stage in response the crisis of September as 11th. Muslim respondents expressed the need to both strengthen and assert their religious identities in order to

¹ For Peek (2005), the *ascribed* stage is marked as a time of limited critical reflection on what it means to be Muslim. In this stage, youth are likely to adhere to their assigned identities (p. 224). In the *chosen* stage, youth “develop a more concrete, cognitive conception of their religious identity” (p. 226) and no longer view the religion as unquestionable or ascribed. Muslims in this stage consciously choose their Muslim identity by learning more about the religion and seeking their own religious communities (pp. 226 -230). Finally, the *declared* stage is somewhat ill defined. This stage is marked asserting one’s religious identity and increased importance placed on positively representing Muslims and Islam to others (pp. 231-233, 236). For Peek, this stage is marked by a critical juncture (e.g. 9/11) which, to an extent, limits its generalizability in other contexts.

retain a positive self-perception and correct prevailing public perceptions of Islam. In conclusion, Peek (2005) argues,

...[The] aftermath of September 11 solidified Muslim American identity and made it a stronger social and political force. Certainly Muslim Americans recognized their role in the public sphere prior to the tragic events of September 11; however, that [9/11] catastrophe led to an identity formed in response to crisis -- *an identity of crisis* -- as Islam came under intense scrutiny by non-Muslim Americans (p. 237).

Studies such as Peek's, tend to highlight one side of the "Self and Other" framework in identity construction (Duderija 2008, p. 382-283). Most notably, the prevailing temporal frameworks posit that "dominant socio-cultural and political climate and its approach to minority cultures play an important role in the formation of Muslim identities and behaviors in the context of immigrant minority religion/culture" (Duderija 2008, p. 384). In contrast, scholars such as Eid (2007) acknowledge and incorporate both an external *and* internal process as sociological approaches to religious identity construction. Thus, one's religious identity under this framework is formed in response to the cultural and *internal* "processes of learning, accepting, and internalizing some or all patterns of behavior of one or more ethnic or religious groups" alongside *social* factors such as an individual's relationship with family or secondary institutional organizations (e.g. schools) and voluntary associations such as religious or cultural organizations (p. 29). Not only do post-9/11 frameworks fall short in including these internal social and cultural factors, they additionally fall short in explaining religious identity construction in the absence of exogenous shocks to religious communities (i.e. September 11). Surely Muslims, regardless of age, still navigate ongoing effects of September 11th (namely instances of Islamophobia amid America's ongoing "war on terror") however, and as this paper will argue, young Muslims search for the "true Islam" today is prompted by internal dynamics (i.e. Islamic pluralism) more so than external factors or events.

Finding the “True Islam” in a Diverse Ummah

Religious ethnicity refers to religious communities whose religious traditions are shared by other ethnic communities (Hammond & Warner 1993, pp. 55-66). Scholars have found that Muslim immigrants, regardless of cultural or ethnic background, consider religion to be the most important element for cultural reproduction (Warner & Wittner, 1998, p.16). The central role religion has and continues to play in the preservation of ethnic identity highlights difficulties and tensions around separating the two, especially in heterogeneous Muslim communities like the United States (Duderija, 2008 p. 372). Scholars such as Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) hypothesize: “...second and subsequent generation-dominated religious institutions will likely be more pan-religious and/or more pan-ethnic in their practices, identities, and memberships” (p. 406). But the question still remains on how Muslim youth will come to develop such pan-ethnic/religious understandings and practices and what challenges they face in such processes. For instance, in the *ascribed* stage of religious identity as offered by Peek (2005), young Muslims often practice forms of “cultural religion” without critical reflection. By contrast, when Muslim youth enter the *chosen* stage of religious identity formation, they are often forced to reconcile with the coupling of culture and religion by older Muslim generations. Building on Peek’s framework, this paper argues that advancing in the stages of religious identity constitutes a new ‘identity-crisis’ in which Muslim youth must decipher what is ‘culture’ and what is ‘religion’.

Islam in the “Contact Zone”

Ali (2011) argues that the unique conditions of the United States; namely the blending of both immigrant and American-born Muslims with diverse cultural backgrounds, the term ‘*American Muslim*’ is best understood in the context of a *contact zone* understood as a “social space where cultures [histories and subjectivities] meet, clash, and grapple with each other often

in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991: p. 29). Within the contact zone(s) of the United States, Ali posits the understanding of America and Islam are being both debated and defined (p. 356) In her ethnographic study of American Muslims’ in Phoenix, Arizona. Ali finds that Muslims tend to be unaware that variations of Islamic practices are a result of standardized scholarly interpretations and schools of thought (*madhabs*) which tend to be country or region specific. Where no specific *madhab* is followed, as the case in the United States, debates arise regarding what is truly “Islamic” as many confuse or conflate cultural practices with religious norms and practice (p. 364). In contrast, this paper finds that young Muslims are *keenly aware* of diverging understandings and practices of Islam. In addition, young Muslims face greater difficulty than the first generation immigrant population as they become less tied to their parents’ cultural heritage and understanding of the faith. The *contact zone* framework is useful in that it helps to conceptualize two parallel phenomena in which American Muslims, especially younger generations, navigate and contend *internal* and *external* forms of religious pluralism. However, it is important to note this phenomenon is not exclusive to Muslims.

For instance, Kurien (2020) argues, “the decoupling of religion and ethnicity by children of immigrants is a broader phenomenon not just confined to Muslims”. Citing her prior ethnographic research on second-generation Indian Christians in the United States, Kurien (2012) finds that second-generation Indians reject cultural practices and interpretations of their first generation parents. Instead, they adopt a “culture-free” or a more ‘Western’ understanding of Christianity. Based on her comparative research, Kurien (2020) posits the decoupling process is a result of “larger shifts in the understanding and practice of religion and of ethnicity” (p. 1). This phenomenon has also been noted as a “spiritual turn” (Houtman & Aupers 2007) in

which individuals embark on a “self-authored search,” (Roof 1999, p. 82) navigating cultural practices and understandings of faith, marked by broader ideas about religion (Kurien 2020).

The shortcomings of the 9/11 temporal framework and the lack of scholarly attention to internal social and cultural factors of religious identity construction calls for a new framework to understand two interrelated phenomena: (i) Understanding the new “spiritual turn” among Muslims who seek to decouple religion and culture and (ii) the mechanisms young employ on their “self-authored” searches.

III. Methods

Between February and April 2020, I carried out field research and interviews for this study at the bi-annual *Understanding Islam Lecture Series* at Syracuse University. I attended the six-week program weekly on Tuesday evenings for an hour and a half and conducted participant observation and interviews. Since the lecture series is free and open to the Syracuse community, I was able to participate. However, my repeat attendance and close relationship with Muslim Chaplain, Amir Duric, permitted me to conduct this project. In addition to the weekly lectures, I also attended other events related to Islam including an event held by a neighboring college’s Muslim Student Association (MSA) in addition to Syracuse University’s “Islamic Awareness Week” (March 2-7, 2020), and several congregational Friday prayers held on campus.

The data for this project draws on four in-depth interviews with Muslim attendees at the 2020 *Understanding Islam Lecture Series*. The interview sample was limited to the four Muslim attendees of the series who attended most, if not all of the sessions. Of the interviewees, the sample was evenly split between men and women as well as U.S and non-U.S nationals. Interviews were around forty to ninety minutes and were recorded and transcribed using the DeScript application. Following, I employed open coding and abductive analysis adhering to the

guidelines set by Charmaz (2006) and Timmermans and Tavory (2012) respectively. I analyzed my interview transcripts and re-read my fieldnotes and interviews several times by sorting the data by recurring concepts and themes. Names and identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Table 1.1: The Muslim Participants

Name and Gender	Age	Nationality	Ethnicity	Occupation
Shoxa (F)	24	Moroccan/American	Berber/Amazigh	Employed/Non-Profit Sector
Raj (M)	30	American	Pakistani	Graduate Student
Sheila (F)	28	Turkish	-----	Graduate Student
Hama (M)	Mid 30's	Turkish	Kurdish	Graduate Student

III. Research Setting

For six weeks, participants from the Syracuse community and university students met in the multi-purpose room of Bird Library once a week on chilly winter evenings. Located in Central New York, Syracuse has the third largest immigrant population in the Central New York region (11.8%) (Weaver 2019). Moreover, it is estimated the Syracuse population ranks *more* religious than New Yorkers on a whole² (Religion Syracuse NY) and it is further estimated that Islam is the third most prevalent faith tradition after Catholicism and various protestant sects (Religion in Syracuse NY).

Syracuse University also reflects the city's religious diversity. Syracuse University's 'Spiritual Life' at Henrick's Chapel employs nine chaplaincies across world religions and consists of approximately 30 religious student groups (Syracuse University). In addition, the

² 56% of the Syracuse population identified with being religious in comparison to 52% of all New Yorkers sampled.

Hendrick's Chapel sponsors numerous religious and spiritual programs such as the bi-yearly *Understanding Islam Lecture Series*.

Every semester, Muslim Chaplain, Amir Duric, begins his semi-annual *Understanding Islam Series* by sharing his inspiration for the program based on his interfaith experiences with Christian and Jewish communities. The demographics of the series' participants are predominantly Caucasian who predominantly come from Judeo-Christian backgrounds and are often the series' most active participants, rarely hesitating to ask controversial questions or seek points of clarification. For instance, when Chaplain Duric shared the series concludes every semester with a visit to a local mosque, Linda, a Caucasian university employee, struggled to formulate her question but finally blurted: "Is it...is it ok for *women* to visit [the mosque]?" Linda's question suggested that non-Muslim women (or perhaps women more generally) were not permitted in Islamic places of worship.

Another example concerned the continuity of Islam in relation to the other Abrahamic faiths (i.e. Judaism and Christianity). One student from a nearby college inquired how Muslims view religions who worship multiple Gods such as Hindus. In response, Chaplain Duric gave a diplomatic response saying that "Islam is a religion of tolerance". Unsatisfied with this answer, the student politely asked if he could pose the question to the Muslim students in the room and hear their input in which two older Muslims were quick to echo Duric's response whereas the younger Muslims stayed quiet and avoided the question.

Each year, young Muslims make up a consistent portion of the *Understanding Islam Lecture Series* but often remain quiet in the background taking notes. Upon embarking on this project, I was originally interested on what prompts non-Muslim attendees to learn about different religions. However, after the initial session, many non-Muslim attendees shared their

rational for attendance which broadly centered on (i) work (e.g. teachers in the community who engage with Muslim students), (ii) personal relationships (e.g. close friendships or in-laws who are Muslim), and prior engagement with the faith (e.g. interfaith activities and/or previous academic exposure to Islam). What was less clear, however, was the motivation for Muslims to attend events on their own religious tradition.

Assuming Muslim youth already had religious foundations and alternative sources for religious information (namely local mosques or Islamic Sunday schools), I was curious as to why young Muslims were interested in Islam. Their lack of participation paired with diligent note taking and mostly quiet demeanors suggested they, like the non-Muslim attendees, were there to learn. In my interviews with non-Muslim attendees, I found that young Muslims learning about Islam was a keyhole issue that pointed to a larger question of religious identity construction among youth. The following sections are organized in three overarching themes from my study which include: (i) origins of religious identity struggles, (ii) mechanisms employed to understand what is ‘true Islam,’ and (iii) shared understandings of broad religious ethics. Within these sections, I point to key differences observed across gender and national origin.

IV. Origins of Struggle: *Moving from an ‘Adhered’ to ‘Chosen’ Religious Identity “Muslim by Birth” and The Role of Family Upbringing*

An hour prior to the *Understanding Islam Series*, I sit in Raj’s office at the University in a quiet enclave of Maxwell Hall. On this particularly cold and rainy evening, I am warmed by the colorful children’s drawing on the office walls. The son of first-generation Pakistani parents, Raj begins by sharing his religious upbringing,

I’m Muslim by, you know, by birth. That’s pretty much the religion there [in Pakistan] and my parents followed it and you know, their parents followed as well. So growing up I didn’t really, you know, I *knew* I was Muslim, but I wasn’t

really practicing as, you know, it says to practice... So that was kind of like the thing, okay, I'm Muslim just by name.

In the next forty minutes of our conversation, Raj shares with me his journey in understanding his identity as a Muslim. Sharing that he felt his religious identity was inherited through birth and family lineage, Raj notes it wasn't until he moved away from his parents' home that he felt closer to Islam noting he had more of a 'choice'. Throughout his interview, Raj often associated religious *practice* with an increased sense of religious identity. When I asked Raj to clarify what he meant when he said he was "not practicing as it says to practice" he responded,

You know, you're doing your five prayers. That's kinda like the main thing, you know, like trying to commit. It was just like, you know, praying five times. A day, kind of knowing what you're praying about, you know, learning the language of Arabic so you can properly read like the Quran instead of the English trans, um, translation... Um, think that another thing is like there's the thing of like the *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (not permissible) ratio with food.

Raj's experience aligns with Peek's (2005) first two classifications or stages of religious identity: *adherence* and *chosen identity*. In the prior passages, Raj expresses his childhood adherence to his 'assigned identity' as a Muslim, noting he understood he was Muslim without awareness of the associated practices. Raj noted during this stage he didn't fully internalize what it meant to be *Muslim* and did not reflect critically on his family's practice of the religion until he moved out of state. Upon moving, Raj entered the '*chosen* stage' where his religiosity increased as he became critical of his religious upbringing stating he and his family were "not practicing as it [Islam] says to practice" which included praying consistently, understanding religious text, and eating in accordance to Islamic laws and customs. When citing the difficulties, Raj noted the lack of guidance from his parents, notably his father not praying consistently or selectively during the holy month of Ramadan. Although Raj notes his mom is "very practicing", her

Pakistani background seemed to have given Raj a disadvantage in comparison to native Arabic speakers in understanding and learning the Quran in its original form, being Arabic, which Raj shared his Islamic Sunday school education fell short in addressing.

Although Raj's initial exposure to differentiating practices of Islam were a result of his involvement in the Muslim community of Toronto, he also cited conflicting views from *within* his own family, namely his in-laws.

There's a lot of discussion about like the *halal* and eating a lot of non-*halal* food versus what's considered *halal*. So I think, um, that's like something I'm trying to figure out too. Cause like, you know, someone told me something where you can eat certain meats as long as if it's slaughtered by the person or the book, meaning like someone like Jewish or Christian or someone that's practicing Islam -- so he can eat that. Then my sister in law tells me something different, like, "no, you know, it has to be a Muslim person doing it". So it's like those kind of beliefs -- there's just a lot. you know, just about the kind of teachings you kind of follow and scholars and stuff.

In contrast to Ali's (2011) assertion that the majority of Muslims are unaware of the variations of Islamic practices, young Muslims such as Raj seem to be keenly aware of these differences of opinion and understandings of the faith. This may suggest that second-generation Muslims, more so than first-generation immigrants, are better able to identify, navigate, and in some cases accept alternative views and practices of Islam.

A father now himself, Raj noted his son as one of the primary factors in becoming more grounded in Islam taking great pride in the fact his daughter partakes in the *Hafiz* program which consists of memorizing the Quran in Arabic. Raj shared with me with a big smile on his face, 'she know more *surahs* than me'. When I asked Raj the primary differences between his daughters and his own religious upbringing he responded,

Um, I think the main thing is just like me spending time with them and doing it, you know. My dad, you know, he didn't really do it so much, you know, he didn't really like *teach* us. Or talk about the importance of it. So that's like one of the main differences, which, you know, it's not his fault or anything. He just worked a lot and stuff. So I think that's like the main thing. You kinda gotta sit down and you gotta devote your time and you gotta do it too. You can't just go like, "Oh, you know, pray" but you're not praying. So that's one of the things. So you can't really be a hypocrite. You got to practice what you're saying.

For Raj, being Muslim and passing on the Muslim identity is intrinsic to leading by example and quite literally 'practicing what you preach'. Feeling he lacked such an example from his own father, Raj has begun to take an active role in his son's upbringing by first improving his own practice and understanding of Islam. This aligns with Peek's (2005) findings among her Muslim respondents who expressed it was important for them to solidify and maintain their Muslim identities in order to teach it to their future children (p. 229)

A Public, Private, or Political Matter? The Effects of Religious Politicization

Similar to Raj, Sheila of Turkey noted her father also had an effect on her religious identity. With her long black hair, Sheila is not identifiable as Muslim at first glance. However, Sheila shared she once considered being more 'visibly' Muslim during one of the summers she and her sister attended Islamic school,

So, after that summer, I started thinking that maybe I should wear a hijab, or I should cover my head. And that my dad didn't want me to do that (laughs). Even though my mom, my mom covers her head and like most of my family and women in my family, they cover. They are covered. But my dad didn't want me to do that. I think it's because of the politics and all the political atmosphere and circumstances in Turkey, because at the time if you are wearing hijab, you can't go to the universities or you can't work in governmental jobs or like those kinds of things.

Within our conversation, Sheila shared her observations of the setbacks Muslim women who chose to cover, including her aunt who had to choose between work and wearing the hijab upon getting a government appointed teaching position. Sheila shares,

I remember my aunt struggling with that, like the decision of taking her hijab off or like keeping it, but not working. At the end she took it off and she worked, and she's not wearing hijab since then and I don't know if she regrets it. She sometimes talks about it.

Sheila additionally cited a friend she had at her private university who covered, noting that although her test scores would have permitted her to go to any top medical or engineering school, her choice to cover influenced her decision to attend Sheila's university.

The political environment of Sheila's country, although being predominantly Muslim, played a significant role in shaping her identity. Stating in her interview that she is "Turkish first, then Muslim." When I asked her to elaborate, she noted her parent's push for Sheila to be economically independent and patriotic sharing, "They [Sheila's parents] were always encouraging me and my sister, like, if you're doing something, you should be doing it for your, like, country it's... that's how they raised me." However, the politicization of religion is not the only explanatory factor in the shaping of Sheila's identity or questions. Later in the interview, Sheila shared an additional reason for the primacy of her Turkish identity over her Muslim identity,

Maybe the reason for me that my second identity is being Muslim but the first is Turkish because I remember my dad drinking when we'd go out to dinner, even though like my mom wears hijab. So I know that my - my dad was drinking. I never, I never, I, I don't drink, I never tried it, but he did it. I remember those parts. So I feel like religion was part of the family, but not *too* much. But at the same time that there is that hypocrisy in my family too. So my dad was not practicing at all, but he always wanted us to go to those like mosques to learn how to read Quran or like sending me and my sister to those summer schools.

Similar to Raj, Sheila's transition to the *chosen identity* stage in her religious identity construction was marked by increased questioning and critical reflection of her religious upbringing, namely her father's "un-Islamic" behavior of drinking. Although coming from different social and political environments, both Sheila and Raj cited the disconnect between

what their parents taught and practiced both employing the word ‘hypocrisy’. For Raj, this was his dad’s lack of praying and transmitting religious knowledge. For Sheila, this was her dad’s encouragement of religious learning for she and her sister while also partaking in ‘*haram*’, or forbidden activities (e.g. drinking alcohol) within the Muslim faith. Sheila shares,

...but it's just like people talk about these things [religion], or like you, you get to know some people and they talk about religion, how important it is, but then you see something they do and it's wrong. So... that makes me question things...I'm actually not questioning the religion Islam, but I'm questioning how people practice it. That's why it affects me.

Within Sheila’s reflection, she additionally takes into account the effects of Turkey’s politicization of Islam and the effects the government’s appropriation of the religion had on her family members and friends (e.g. Sheila’s father prohibiting her to wear the hijab and her aunt’s experience with the hijab). The intersectionality denoted in Sheila’s story highlights both *internal* (e.g. family) and *external* (e.g. politicization of Islam) factors which worked to construct her “cultural” or “religious-self” as posited by Eid (2007). The workings of both internal and external factors are also illustrated in another respondent’s experience.

Hama, also from Turkey, comes from a Kurdish background. Hama shared with me that both his parents were educated through *halaka* circles which primarily transmit religious knowledge. Thus, in contrast to Sheila and Raj, Hama’s story suggests he was raised with a strong religious upbringing with coherent teachings and practices from both parents. Rather than stemming from the family, Hama’s transition to the *chosen* stage arose when he was faced with a different way of life, culture, and peoples upon moving from his rural village to a more urbanized city in Western Turkey. Hama reflects on this transition sharing,

But then I went to school there in the West of Turkey and there are many kinds of people: secular nationalist, religious people. Although we were religious as a family but at school, we learn[ed] about different things. We read books and we talked about different things, which my parents, they didn't know anything about, so I need to deal with all these new terms by myself. Try to understand them, interpret them, and somehow, adopt these new things into my life. So I was always thinking about whatever I learned. It was like kind of learning from the beginning, not taking too much from the family, but learning from the things I learned from school by myself...

Moreover, Hama's mention of 'secular, religious, and nationalist people' are reflective of the political environment of Turkey which Sheila similarly had to navigate. Explicitly mentioning the politicization of religion in Turkey, Hama notes,

So that's why I also want to really focus on religion and get a deep knowledge of religion so I can really understand and interpret what's going on in my family, in my society, and in my country.

Like Raj, Hama was forced to reconcile new information and practices on his own, without the help of his family. For Raj this was religious knowledge whereas for Hama this new information was in the form of modern concepts and sciences.

Combining the Old with the New: Islam and Modernity

Similar to Hama, Sheila also developed questions during her academic study of the sciences especially in attempts to reconcile her scientific studies with her belief in a higher power.

I've been studying science for so long, sometimes I questioned myself about the, about the beginning of time, like how everything started or the universe like started and everything. Uh, cause sometimes I had those kinds of conversations with my professors or my friends. And like I, I appreciate scientific knowledge, but at the same time I believe in something [God] and it's, it's, it's kind of like, how to say, like cognitive dissonance or I don't know what is, it's called. Like I have conflict in myself.

Sheila notes the relationship between religion and science as one of the primary sources of her questions, often posed to Syracuse University's Muslim Chaplain, Amir Duric. When I

asked Sheila if she received satisfying answers to her questions she responded, “I received satisfying answers (laughs), but I still have questions I always have questions (laughs).”

Apart from her academics, Sheila also shared she has general questions about different Quranic sayings and practices using the example of polygamy in Islam which permits men to have four wives,

So for example, with the four, four... Like man can marry four women. I mean, I know the story behind it. Like I know what...what is meant with it. But still like if people.. I mean this was one of the discussions in Understanding Islam Series too. When you look at the statistics it's not that high, like people who marry four [wives]...and it's not common in Turkey at all, but still like some people are practicing this and maybe I'm not questioning that part of Quran, but I'm questioning why people do this in this day and age, maybe.

Both Sheila and Hama’s experiences are reflective of a larger struggle for young Muslims who attempt to reconcile Islam with modern ways of life and understandings. This phenomenon is not only restricted to modern sciences, but as Sheila shares, modern family relations and gender norms. Using the example of polygamy within the religion, Sheila acknowledges the historical rationale behind the permissibility in Islam to have four wives, but outside of the historical context she struggles to understand why the practice continues today.

Although Sheila and Hama both noted the reconciliation between science and religion in their interview, Hama did not express any potential incompatibility. Having been educated in Islamic Sciences in Turkey, Hama reflects on his journey reconciling the two.

[t]he main objective behind them [traditional *madrassas*] is to actually create a new platform for students where they can learn Islam not only from colleges and universities, but following classical books and adopting the classical books plus the new ways of understanding social science... And somehow combine them as synthesize them and try to find the solutions to problems of modern societies they might face... For example, a student who was studying there, who was studying Ghazali one day and [on the] second day he was studying Marx... So students,

they are able to somehow be aware of the issues of modern societies as well as the classical books and disciplines.

From Hama's perspective, the merging of classical Islamic studies works to help address modern-day issues. Rather than being incompatible, the two are complimentary. Hama goes on to share that his background and training in Islamic sciences has helped him personally in his subsequent studies noting,

I have always [been] able to apply a different ontology, a different epistemology, and a different methodology to many things, many problems, many topics...Because I am someone who studies Islamic disciplines which is a completely different part of the paradigm from the modern one.

For Ameli (2002) both respondents could be classified as *modernist* Muslims who are supportive of religious reform in accordance with modern thought (pp. 134-139). However, the fact modern aspects sparked more questions about the religion for Sheila than it did for Hama may be indicative of larger gender differences. Where both cited the reconciliation between religion and science, one could argue that men are less affected by these continued beliefs and practices.

Overall, Hama and Sheila sought more religious knowledge to understand both their external and internal environments to order to understand differences both within their families and societies. Hama stressed in our conversation, "Again, I was thinking about this: why people, [why] they are different". Differences are not always political or stem from the family. For Shoxa, exposure to different youth in educational and voluntary organizations within her Muslim community sparked critical thinking and reflection of the religion.

They Did Whaaat? Between Culture and Religion.

Shoxa, age 24, has spent practically her whole life in the United States. Coming from Syria at age one, Shoxa's parents are first generation Amazigh/Berber immigrants. When reflecting on her childhood, Shoxa was quick to differentiate between cultural and religious aspects of her upbringing, sharing,

He [Shoxa's father] prays spontaneously here and there, he doesn't fast all the time. He's strict in terms of like when I would leave my house for high school, he'd make sure that I would be like, I would be dressing modest. And I think it's probably more, he's more strict in terms of the culture wise instead of like religious and, um, yeah.

In line with existing scholarship, Shoxa's experience is representative of the coupling of culture and religion by older Muslim generations noting how her father's emphasis on 'modest dress' when Shoxa would leave the house. Shoxa went on to share her family's culture prohibited her from doing 'normal childhood things' such as having a sleepover with other Muslim girls.

So I have, I've had a lot of restrictions as I was growing up. I wasn't allowed to do a lot of things that other kids would do...Um, I was not able to, for example, sleep over even at like the, with the group of girls from Sunday school *at* the Sunday school building. My dad did not like that idea.

Although similar to Raj, Shoxa's father was not what most would define as a "practicing Muslim," marked by consistent prayer and fasting, this did not seem to be a factor for Shoxa's religious questioning or "self-authored search" of Islamic understanding. Rather, the relationship between culture and religion is an ongoing theme in both shaping and challenging Shoxa's identity as a Muslim. As a result, the majority of Shoxa's exposure to Islam stems from religious Sunday schools she and her family have attended since arriving to Syracuse. Shoxa notes that her family's

first experience at Sunday school was unsuccessful, recalling she and her siblings felt they were not accepted for who they were as Kurds,

Being Berber, we've always gotten hate from different cultures. We're not accepted, and it's really, it's really sad. And, um, where people are very, like, there's a lot of people that are very tied to their culture. I'm not like that. I identify myself as a Muslim first and then Berber because that, to me, I don't know how to explain it.

In contrast to Sheila, Shoxa's places primacy on her religious rather than her ethnic or national identity. Shoxa shared this could be a result of her lack of exposure to other Kurds as one possible explanation for the primacy of her Muslim identity over her ethnic origins further sharing that Islam was a way to "connect with other people" despite cultural divides within the Muslim community itself. Although Shoxa and her family eventually changed Sunday schools which has mostly been a positive experience for her religious education and identity, Shoxa still shared, "I still don't feel 100%, um, like that I fit there".

Shoxa's discussion on the diversity of the Syracuse Muslim community tended to yield positive, negative, and sometimes confusing reflections. On the positive side, Shoxa enjoyed the exposure to different cultures (e.g. Arab, African American, Bosnian, South Asian) and their respected practices. Shoxa shared with me that last Ramadan she attended as many different mosques' *taraweeh* prayers (evening prayers during the holy month of Ramadan). Beyond prayers however, varying Islamic norms across cultures, especially in regard to what is deemed permissible, challenged Shoxa's views on Islamic practice. Specifically drawing on her experience with the Bosnian community,

When I went into the Bosnian community, I was like shocked! I'm like, Oh my God! I remember like, it was probably the first or second time that I went to their masjid and I was amongst girls that were literally... Well, probably four or five years younger than myself. And a few that were my age. And like those girls were talking about like their boyfriends! In a masjid! And I'm like, "what?!". Um,

with like my community, we couldn't say like, "Oh, I have a boyfriend". If you talk about something like that you have to like, keep *really* low because it spreads like fire. And I thought it was just interesting on how, um, like even though the Bosnians are liberal in terms of they like drink and they like smoke and they party and they like do like, um, they have official intercourse before marriage. But when it comes to Ramadan and praying like they're the *first* ones to be like, you know what I mean?

Shoxa went on to explain that although female Bosnian youth who do not normally wear the hijab would dress more modestly than she would herself in the mosque. In the passage provided, Shoxa is perplexed by what seems incompatible: young Muslim women who partake in all things deemed impermissible by the standards of Shoxa's community yet take their religious practice (in terms of being on time for prayer and dressing modestly) very seriously.

Shoxa went on to note that Bosnian youth are more involved in religious life at their centers than her own Middle Eastern community,

I feel a lot of their [Bosnian] youth are more involved than the, the middle, like the Middle Eastern or I like the other communities' youth for some reason. I don't know. Maybe because they, the masjids are more welcoming, and they understand that these kids are more liberal, they do certain things, but they still accept them. Whereas for these other masjids and mosques um, they... Kids don't feel like they're accepted because it's like taboo or it's like, like *eib* (shameful), like shameful, to do X, Y, and Z, and they feel like they can't go into these places of worship because they're not going to feel accepted or feel judged and that they're less of a Muslim. Whereas the Bosnians, I think they like embrace that?

Although Shoxa stressed the communal divides and divisions, it appears the larger issue for her within the Muslim community is both acceptance and inclusion. In the prior passage, Shoxa speculates that the community's acceptance of Bosnian youth's actions (e.g. drinking and smoking) in turn resulted in increased practice and participation within religious spaces. Further emphasizing the need for such acceptance, Shoxa concludes,

And to be honest, like... Islam...there's so many cultures. There's so many like ideas and like levels of spirituality and ideas and stuff that you can't really look at it [Islam] that way [zero-sum]. And that's why these masjids here have a hard time

including their youth, or like have high participation of youth because no one should like they feel like they're going to be judged.

Shoxa's experience with the Bosnian community is reflective of Eid's (2007) 'cultural process' in which one learns and reflects on the patterns of behavior of one or more ethnic or religious groups (p. 26). Moreover, Shoxa's reflections highlighted a larger issue at hand, acceptance and inclusion of youth in communal places of worship. The disconnect between religious spaces and youth highlights a larger phenomenon in which young Muslims feel alienated from mosques which are dominated by and tend to cater to older immigrant populations. Moreover, messages from such mosques tend to not resonate with the lives and concerns of Muslim youth (Ali 2018, p. 260). In line with the scholarship, Shoxa noted her struggle in connecting with religious sermons or *khutbahs* which she feels lack applicability to everyday life. Shoxa noted that she preferred Chaplain Duric's *khutbahs* at Friday congregational prayer at the university noting they were "more relatable". When Shoxa struggled to provide an example of an unrelatable *khutbah* I drew on a shared experience we both had at a local mosque,

Ivy: Well, actually, well, actually, let me help you out here about like, I remember when we went to...

Shoxa: Al Huda?

Ivy: Right, and it was about like extra prayers.

Shoxa: Yes! Thank you, yes! And it's like if you don't do the extra prayers what do you gain from that lecture? Whereas like Amir [Syracuse University Chaplain], he talks about like, *kalb* [Arabic for heart], like the heart, and like spirituality and like things that like are *currently* going on. Like, I don't think that masjids do that...like the extra prayers sort of thing, or like fasting on like Mondays and Thursdays and all that. And like if I don't take part in that, what am I going to gain from this lecture? Probably just like information, like, "Oh, Hey, there's *this*" (*rolls eyes*) but... yeah.

In sum, there are several factors which foster the initial and continued questioning and critical thinking among Muslim youth in regard to their faith. Religious practices (or lack

thereof) of family members, politicized religious environments, modern concepts, and exposure to different groups both within and outside of one's religious community. The intersectionality of these factors further support Eid's (2007) framework which highlights multifaceted aspects of religious identity construction (e.g. *internal & external, cultural, and social*). Building off the work of Peek (2005), such questions and critiques tend to arise as one transitions from the *adhered to chosen* stage of their religious identity. In other words, when youth become actively aware of their religious identity and choose to express it independent of their upbringings, youth begin to question and reconcile the faith for themselves. For many Muslims, foreign and second-generation Americans alike, the *chosen* stage is for many the beginning of their "self-authored search" (Roof 1999, p. 82). Continuing with Shoxa's experience, the following section discusses the mechanisms and resources young Muslims use to navigate their journey and understanding of 'true Islam'.

V. **Tactics and Resources of Muslim Youth: *The Role of the Community***

Shoxa's experience with the local Muslim community highlights a disconnect between Islamic institutions and youth. Shoxa consistently stressed the applicability of Islamic teachings in her interview and expressed her desire to talk about 'deep issues' such as mental health, marriage, and gender. As a result, Shoxa noted that she associates more with the Syracuse Muslim Student Association (MSA) and an independent Islamic learning center, rather than any of the local masjids. When I inquired as to how these two religious organizations addressed relevant issues she responded,

Um, I would say some of the issues that are talked about in these spaces are probably like...That deal more with like actual spirituality, or like the connection between you and God and like mental health issue and challenges that *actually* like are relevant to us, like things that we can *actually apply* to our daily life because Islam is a way of life. But I think there's mosques like they're so

irrelevant that like people like can't connect to it. And it's like, it's like, "Oh, you either have to do this *this* way, or like you're gonna like not enter *Jannah* (heaven)", you know what I mean? And whereas like [X] learning center...or like the SU MSA, they touch upon issues that we can relate to. And I say *we* as in like people of *our* age, whereas the mosques talk about issues that might be relevant for those that are older and have kids and stuff. So that's what I mean by that.

There are two important insights from Shoxa in this passage. The first being Shoxa's mention of 'Islam as a way of life' which highlights her desire to learn more than just practices, often stressed by local masjids. In contrast, Shoxa is searching for the *spiritual* aspects of the faith or alternative ways to strengthen one's relationship with God.

In an informal meeting with Amir Duric in the beginning phases of my research project, Duric echoed Shoxa's observations noting that many mosques are led by immigrants who resonate with first generation immigrants but fail to reach the youth and find ways to meaningfully include them in their religious spaces and leadership roles. As a result, such religious institutions further wide the gap between first and second generation Muslims as addressed in the existing scholarship. Perhaps best summarized by Shoxa,

People make Islam *so* complicated and it doesn't reach people the way that it should... (pause) And the way that the MSA does it, I would, I would give more props to Amir to be honest, because like before him, there was someone that was very, very conservative and I couldn't really connect to his lectures either. But, Amir's lectures, he just makes it so like relatable to you.

Muslim Student Associations (MSA) in North American and Muslim youth organizations more broadly have been cited in the literature as an alternative for young Muslims who do not resonate with the beliefs and practices of their parents or local Muslim institutions (Schmidt 2002). Peek (2005) notes that such organizations "provide a safe environment for discussing and practicing beliefs and, ultimately, constructing religious identities" (p. 228). For Shoxa, involvement with the Syracuse MSA is not only equated to Chaplain Duric's lectures but also the welcoming environment he's created. Sharing about her hesitance to first become involved with

the MSA, Shoxa noted Chaplain Duric's approachability, non-judgement, and listening skills were influential for improving her spiritual development and ability to feel a part of an accepting community who she could learn with and relate to.

Sheila similarly noted the need for acceptance and non-judgement in her interview also citing Chaplain Duric as an influential factor in her involvement with the MSA since arriving in the United States. In contrast to the previous Chaplain who held Duric's position, Sheila notes that she feels Duric is more approachable and easy to connect with,

With Amir, he's, he's having some like coffee hours. On Wednesday mornings or Tuesday mornings. So sometimes I go, I ask my questions. Sometimes I had lots of questions (laughs) about religion and I just feel more comfortable with him. And also he's young. That's why maybe (laughs).

For these two women, feeling comfortable and accepted are key factors to develop their spirituality and Muslim faith. Sheila additionally notes the importance of feeling accepted *outside* her religious community for the advancement her faith, notably if she ever chose to adopt the practice of wearing hijab,

...but I feel like my Turkish friends, they would judge me (laughs) and they are really like, they're my best friends, but at the same time, I feel like they would, they would ask questions. Like, "why did you do it? Why are you.. like you are doing PhD, you're like studying engineering, but you're wearing hijab". There is that prejudice in Turkey still. Even today. Yeah. I think people don't have that awareness and I think it's still affects me, maybe deep down, I don't know, but also I, I'm not ready. I'm not ready for that.

At the conclusion of our conversation, Sheila mentioned feelings of sadness reflecting on her experience with being Muslim in her home country,

[I] feel like if I'm... if I'm a practicing Muslim I'm not that welcomed, or people have biases against me. I think it's because of my environment, not within the family, but my friends. Yeah. It's just, I feel more comfortable here.. It kind of makes me sad (laughs) cause, yeah. I don't know (pause) yeah.

Both Shoxa and Sheila's experience supports the claim that aspects of both *belief* and *belonging* are central factors in the development of one's identity (Duderija 2008, p. 374).

In contrast, both male respondents did not stress such a need to feel accepted.

For Raj, the community serves as a source of knowledge, support, and motivation for continued and increased Islamic practice. In contrast to Shoxa's grievances centering on lack of acceptance and applicability of religious messages by religious leadership, Raj cited lack of community involvement at the masjids. Citing his personal experiences at a local mosque,

It's unfortunate because like I go there [the mosque] and pretty much like, you know, [I] try to go there every night pray and there's like no one really there, like no one's there except the *imam* (mosque leader) , you know, one other person... So just kind of like discouraging pretty much.

Reminiscing on his experience with a different Muslim community in Toronto , Raj recalls Saturday *Seerah* nights, lectures, and community dinners. Upon moving to Syracuse in 2018, Raj recalled some anxiety regarding whether or not he would "fall off" or be able to keep up with his religious practices in the absence of a strong sense of community he established.

Comparing the two, Raj shares,

But here [in Syracuse] it seems like more kind of like more segregated. I'm not sure it's because people are more uncomfortable, you know, they know more people. And that's how a lot of people think, you know, like, "Oh, you know, I don't know anybody here", so I'm going to go to, you know, *this* masjid, one where I know a few people", so guess, you know what I mean, it makes sense. I mean, sometimes you got to think about what's the reason you're going for.

This passage seems to suggest that, at least for Raj, the ethnic divisions are subtracting from the real purpose of the mosque, religious practice. Rather than coming together as Muslims to worship and learn, as he experienced in Toronto, people in Syracuse were more hesitant to participate in a mosque of a different culture with the worry they may not know anyone from

their own community. Interestingly, when I inquired about Raj's participation with the Muslim community at the university MSA (where he works and studies) he responded,

I don't really do like too much like activities and I think it just kind of like a me thing. I'm not really too uhm... I'm not too like, you know, like social it's just me. It's nothing like, 'oh I don't know anybody', but it just I don't really do it that much.

Given that the MSA offers a broad range of social events for Muslims to gather and socialize with one another, I believe Raj's response confirms his perception of religious institutions as primarily sources of religious knowledge and support in increasing one's *deen* or faith. Thus, social gatherings, such as movie nights for instance, do not serve such a purpose for Raj. Similarly, Hama notes the role of the Muslim community to both preserve one's faith and feel more confident in one's Muslim identity sharing, "When you see people *like* you who are practicing like you, who are thinking, wearing, eating, behaving like you, you feel more safe and comfortable and confident". Thus, and in contrast to Raj, Hama sees value in events even if they're primarily for the purpose of socialization, especially for Muslims living in a non-Muslim majority country such as the United States.

In sum, the emphasis on spirituality, questioning, and acceptance among the female respondents differed from the male emphasis on increased practice and Islamic knowledge. Such differences further point to potentially larger gender differences when reconciling with competing versions of Islam. Raj's tactics might resemble a "textual" or authentic return to religion emphasizing core elements of the religion (e.g. praying, reading and reciting Quran, fasting...) whereas women seem to gravitate and internalize broader ideas and understanding of the religion. The following section continues with Hama's experience as a foreigner in the United States and goes on to discuss different experiences between non-US nationals and second-generation Muslim Americans.

The United States: A Curse or Blessing for Religion?

Although both Hama and Sheila place importance on Muslim communities as Shoxa and Raj do, their experiences with Islam and living in the United States differ from the two American respondents, citing more positive experiences and benefits. For instance, the absence of politicization of Islam made Sheila to feel ‘more free to practice’ upon arriving to the U.S,

I felt really welcoming [in the US] and also I liked it actually cause I can go to masjid in the chapel and I can pray, and I can go to [my] office again. And I think I was feeling more comfortable. It surprised me. And I also told this to my friends, my family, and they were, they were also like...Like Turkey is like 90%, so-called 90% is Muslim. but like people are not that respectful, but you are in the U.S and no one tells you anything....

Sheila notes that although she attended a university which prides itself in being ‘liberal’ or accepting of others, she shared that she still felt the need to hide her religious practices from university faculty. In the United States however, Sheila praised the university policies towards *all* religious observances,

Like I have students from... Like Jewish students, Christian students, whatever, and whenever they want to practice, whenever they want to observe something they can. They let me know and they can go. And it's a nice thing, but that, that, that, that's not common in Turkey. I saw that difference. So I think I was feeling more comfortable practicing my religion even though I don't like saying this! (laughs) But that's, that's the truth (laughs). That's true. So then when I came here. I saw that like everyone is really comfortable and I don't need to hide anything.

Similar to Sheila and also coming from Turkey, Hama shares the benefits of Muslim immigrants coming to the U.S, notably a heightened awareness of their Muslim identity and faith. Hama shares that Muslims in Muslim majority countries are largely unaware of their religious identity, but upon coming to the United States they’re forced to find ways to implement religious practice more thoughtfully into their day-to-day lives.

I think Muslims are here they are minority, they are living as minority and there is a dominant culture, which is not Islamic. That's, that's why many Muslims eh, who are not aware of their identity in the, In the countries were they were living before, when they come here, they realize that actually they need to somehow find ways in which they can practice their religion, they can represent their identity

Similar to the Muslim respondents of Ali's (2011) study, both Hama and Sheila see Islamic practice in the United States as more genuine and authentic, divorced from the culture or politicization of their countries (p. 363). In line with Ali (2011), Hama notes Muslims feel an increased appreciation for the religion for foreigners living in non-Islamic societies,

Many Muslims, either in individual level or in an institutional level -- many Muslims and Muslim communities they are very well aware of their identity and they try to, somehow, make these a different identity or, or, or, or religious lives, compatible with the life they have in U.S.

...

Living in the US or any other non-Muslim majority country or society, for a Muslim you realize, you acknowledge the importance and the values of the many, many principles and practices in your religion in a *better* way. In Turkey, let's say you hear an azan five times a day from the minarets of the mosque, but when you but when you come to US, or any non-Muslim majority country. There's no such thing. So you understand *every* day, five times [a day] the words of Azan is actually penetrating to your soul whether you are aware of it or not. But it affects you.

Interestingly, Hama notes that the Muslims' *awareness* of their identity, religion, and history is what makes it possible for those coming from Muslim societies to adapt to their new circumstances and conditions in the United States. However, he goes on to say that the same cannot be said for their children (second generation) and grandchildren (third generation) noting a "loss of [Muslim] identity" and inability to be distinguished as Muslims. For Hama, these defining features include lack of prayer, regard for eating halal foods, drinking alcohol, and loss of religious language (e.g. words like *bismillah* and *inshallah*).

Hama's discussion highlights the tension between what some note as "American" versus

“true” Islam. As offered by Ali (2011), “true Islam” refers to religion free from “cultural impurities” whereas “the Americanization of Islam” defined by her respondents is a “very open Islam [where Muslims] do whatever they want in the name of Islam. They drink, they gamble and go on dates, but they only eat halal meat” (p. 365).

Given none of our respondents openly admitted to partaking in what would be deemed an “Americanized” practiced of the religion by Ali’s (2011) standards, Hama’s observations relate back to Shoxa’s earlier reflection on the Bosnian Muslim community who she observed had ‘boyfriends’ or occasionally drink or smoke. Thus, one could also assume that not only do young Muslims have to decouple religion and ethnic practice from older generations, they also have to decouple ‘American’ and what they deem “true” Islamic practices of some of their Muslim peers.

Such notion was further echoed by Sheila who mentioned the popular Hulu TV show, *Ramy* which highlights a young American-Muslim man who navigates issues such as dating and navigating one’s Muslim identity in a post 9/11 context. Reflecting on the show, Sheila shares,

[Growing up] in Turkey, so maybe I can't relate that much. But I watched it, but based on my experience here, uh, I was able to relate, but it's definitely, yeah, it's definitely different for me and for, uh, Muslim American people here.

Both non-US respondents in the study cited that they felt the United States was mostly a positive experience for them as foreign visitors. Hama cited an increased appreciation for the religion and religious symbols among Muslims and Sheila openly shared feeling *more* free to practice her faith during her time in the U.S. rather than Turkey. It is important to consider that both respondents are Turkish nationals, a country where Islam is highly politicized, which could also account for their overwhelmingly positive reflections. However, and as Hama suggests, growing up with a dominant narrative of Islam and Islamic symbols may assist in transitions to

other environments. In the absence of this, second generation American Muslims are presented with different obstacles in navigating the diversity of Muslim community or *ummah* in the United States. Despite differences among genders and nationalities, this project concludes with an aspect of religious identity that is shared across respondents: Islamic social ethics.

Shared Islamic Values: Giving Back

Apart from the differences observed among gender and nationality, there was one shared commonality across respondents in regard to their understanding of Islam: the concept of giving back. This understanding relates to what Schmidt (2004) terms as “social ethics” in her study of transnational identity formation among western raised Muslims in Denmark, Sweden, and the United States. For Schmidt, social ethics reflect young Muslim’s understandings genuine Islamic practice sharing, “Observance of rituals such as praying and fasting are still considered central by most, but what appears equally or even more important is that of behaving morally and ethically correct” (p. 39). Behaving morally for Schmidt’s respondents ranged from helping the elderly with groceries to participating in politically. Schmidt cites two implications of the ‘ethical movement’ among Muslim youth in Western contexts,

One is practical: involvement in social activism on various levels, ranging from ‘helping old ladies down the stairs’ to political activism within well-established parties. The second implication is ideological and deals with formulations of a perceived genuine and non-cultural Islam (p. 40).

Schmidt posits that in some cases, the ethical imperative of young Muslims is in order to illustrate that Islam is compatible with Western liberal values, especially in the case of the United States where young-Muslims operate in a post-9/11 environment. However, my respondents expression of Islamic ethics may be more reflective of Schmidt’s second imperative of perceived “genuine and non-cultural Islam”

Both Turkish respondents, Sheila and Hama, stressed the need to “give back” through education. Hama notes the importance of sharing and passing along his knowledge of Islam,

I study Islam and when I start to learn Islamic sciences all of our teachers, our masters, they, told us that whenever you go you have to teach what you learn. Whenever there is a need for you to teach, you have to accept to teach. And teaching and learning should be a constant part of your lives. So this is how we were educated. So when I came here, I went to MSA, Muslim or non-Muslim, it doesn't matter, whoever want to study, it's not only about learning the teachings -- it's about studying together, learning together, exchanging your ideas. This is what I tried to do many times

Along similar lines, Sheila shares a piece of wisdom passed down from her uncle about giving back to the community with knowledge as a form of *zakat* or charity in Islam,

He [Sheila's uncle] said like, it's not just about giving some part of your belongings, like physical belongings, like you have money and you have to donate this much money. To practice [*zakat*] it's not just about that. You also should like help people with your knowledge...Of course, as a science teacher, like I'm not teaching anyone religion, but I think that it's like using my knowledge, scientific knowledge, and helping people to learn science. It's also kind of a religious practice for me. Like I'm teaching and I love teaching, and I think that part of me, like religious part, makes me want me to do my job better.

Both Sheila and Hama see sharing their knowledge as a fundamental Islamic attribute, which Sheila frames in the context of *zakat* or Islamic giving. For the two respondents it is both a religious duty as well as a way to get closer to their faith.

For Shoxa, giving back is something she exercises both in her non-profit work and religious practice. Shoxa concluded her interview by sharing grievances regarding the lack of charitable practices with the Muslim community,

...the youth and like others at my Sunday schools and other masjids, the youth are not inspired to help one another and to help the community. And I've always kind of wanted to see that... shelter, I see a lot of religious groups going in and helping and giving back, but I don't see a lot of Muslims doing that, it's mostly like individuals, Muslim individuals that help the community instead of the masjid coming together and doing X, Y, and Z... But I wish that there were.. Like the community as a whole came together and would do more for one another.

Returning to Ebaugh and Chafetz's (2000) hypothesis that "...second and subsequent generation-dominated religious institutions will likely be more pan-religious and/or more pan-ethnic in their practices, identities, and memberships" (p. 406) this limited study suggests that the way in which youth navigate this task and will ultimately arrive to a 'pan-ethnic/religious' understanding will likely vary among gender and nationality. However, a return to basic ethical tenants of the religion, such as giving back, might be a promising starting point in uniting the diverse Muslim *ummah* of the United States.

VI. Discussion: *Between Spirituality and Practice*

Among the two genders, this research notes an interesting trend; men tend to strengthen their religious identity through practice and following Islamic customs whereas women do so by asking more questions and reconciling different issues within Islam and their society. Although practice is also important, female understandings of Islam and general spirituality takes more of a precedence. Related, women tend to gravitate towards Muslim spaces where they feel acceptance and the absence of judgement. For Shoxa and Sheila both, Chaplain Duric was an influential factor especially for Shoxa who often noted her inability to connect with other religious leaders and their messages. Interestingly, Sheila additionally noted setbacks or obstacles for increasing her religiosity outside of the religious community, namely her friends back in Turkey.

In contrast, practice is key for Hama and Raj. For instance, Hama noted the loss of second and third generation Muslim identity, namely in regard to Islamic practices and customs (i.e. praying and eating halal), as the main disadvantage in the United States. Supporting this observation, Raj noted his lack of such religious foundation growing up which has led him to seek out strong Muslim community for support in his religious development. Thus, the best way

to not only strengthen one's faith but additionally transmit it to others, is by the act of *consistent practice* for both our male respondents.

The importance Raj and Hama place on religious practice is a part of a larger trend. In a quantitative study, Ghaffari and Çiftçi (2010) find increased religiosity and practice among Muslim men compared to Muslim women. Especially when faced with prejudice or discrimination men, more so than women, turn towards religion and religious practice as a coping mechanism. Ghaffari and Çiftçi offer some explanations for this finding. First, the authors cite different cultural and traditional expectations between Muslim men and women such as the requirement for men to partake congregational prayers. A competing explanation suggests that Muslim women feel *less* free to practice due to perceived discrimination by the dominant non-Muslim community due to Muslim women's increased religious visibility (i.e. wearing the hijab) rather their religious obligations in comparison to men. In contrast to the latter point, Sheila noted she felt *more free* to practice Islam upon coming to the United States and noted her hesitance to adopt the hijab stemmed from perceived discrimination from her Turkish friends rather than from the dominant non-Muslim community she is living in. Thus, my findings suggests that in general, women place less emphasis on practice given they have more issues to contend with spiritually both for themselves and when answering questions from others (notably topics regarding the veil, polygamy, and male patriarchy in the religion) and as a result may place more importance on their understanding and spirituality than their male counterparts.

VII. Conclusion

Existing scholarship on the identity construction of Muslims in Western contexts have often cited *external* factors that increase the salience of one's faith. Studies on American-Muslim youth in particular have cited 9/11 as an event that further intensified young Muslims' religious identity. Although some societal effects of September 11th persist in the United States today, the external framework may fall short in understanding how religious identity is constructed among today's youth. Recently, scholars such as Ali (2011) and Kurien (2020) have pointed to *internal* factors, namely the coupling of religion and culture which many Muslim's work to deconstruct in their search for 'true' or de-cultured version of Islam. My research similarly points to these internal aspects of identity construction and highlights the various origins of religious questioning and mechanisms employed by Muslims to reconcile competing and sometimes conflicting understandings and practices of the faith across gender and nationalities. I conclude by positing a return to Islamic ethnics as a means for young Muslims to create a pan-ethnic understanding of the religion based on shared principles.

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