

# **Identity, Piety, and Outreach in Boston-area Muslim Students Associations**

An honors thesis for the Program in Middle Eastern Studies

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The American Muslim community has arguably never received as much public attention as it has in the years since the 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the ensuing “War on Terror.” While daily world news headlines inevitably contain the names and events of Muslim majority countries such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, increasing scrutiny also falls upon “the other among us.” Sometimes it is as though Americans expect that their neighborhood mosque has squirreled away the key to toppling Osama bin Laden. Other times innocent naïveté becomes damaging ignorance, with Muslims assumed to be suspicious, possibly dangerous aliens even in the country of their birth. The fact that the vast majority of American Muslims are immigrants, children or grandchildren of immigrants, and/or members of ethnic minorities further complicates the matter. In any case, “Islam” and “Muslim” have become terms of common parlance, with academics and middle American alike often asking the same question: Are Muslim-Americans properly integrated into American society? How many Muslims are “moderate” Muslims versus dangerous extremists? A steadily growing Muslim population often finds itself the subject of heated debates into which it has little input.

A modest amount of scholarship has begun to attempt to answer this question; however, very little has addressed the role of Muslim Students Associations on contemporary college campuses. With this senior thesis, "Identity, Piety, and Outreach in Boston-area Muslim Students Associations" I set out to discover how one group of American Muslims, namely college students, attempt to make their voices heard through various outreach activities. I spent several months conducting participant-observation and one-on-one interviews at campuses around

Boston in order to find out how students' identity and piety shaped goals and strategies for engaging with non-Muslims. The following three questions summarize my main lines of inquiry:

1. What are the students' concepts of their own identities, and how do these identities inform attitudes toward and participation in outreach?
2. How does personal piety inform attitudes toward and practices of outreach?
3. What are the larger implications (for the American Muslim community as a whole, for the future, etc.) of what is happening on campuses now?

Since over half a century ago, Muslims in the United States have founded numerous religious, social, professional, political, and charitable organizations in the United States.<sup>1</sup> These range from the large and well-established umbrella organizations such as Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), to the small and relatively obscure, such as the American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association. Like the community from which they emerged, Muslim organizations must deal with being under the microscope. Some have been established specifically to bridge the gap between public discourse and American Muslim reality. Still, Islamic institutions and Muslim societies exist primarily to advance the well being of their co-religionist members. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri points out that the US Muslim community has long lacked a unified political voice – perhaps because this country provides effective mechanisms for supporting the rights of religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> Many organizations prioritize providing a nurturing Muslim community over fighting the endless tide of misinformation.

In this paper I will outline and analyze the approaches to outreach and broader community involvement taken by one such organization, the Muslim Students Association

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<sup>1</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

(MSA). Why study Muslim Students Associations? As a point around which young members of a minority religious community in the United States gather and become active, the MSA may shape the trajectory of the US Muslim community to come - when its members enter the working world, start families, etc. As we have seen throughout history, student activities often play a leading and defining role in social change movements. Insight into the dynamics of Muslim Students Associations may translate to some insight into the various US Muslim organizations or communities of the future. The Muslim Students Association cannot represent the American Muslim community holistically, but it will reveal one approach to outreach and broader community involvement.

*American Muslims: An Assimilated "Other"*

One of the overarching goals of my research is to explode unfounded fears of the American Muslim community. "Clash of Civilizations"-type arguments, which describe Muslims as a wholly unassimilable cultural fifth column, are based on a heady mix of misinformation and xenophobia. In his book *Engaging the Muslim World*, Juan Cole coins the term "Islam Anxiety" to describe the discomfort Western people as a whole seem to feel when faced with the Muslim world. "Westerners worry about terrorism, intolerance, and immigration. Muslims are anxious about neoimperialism, ridicule, and discrimination."<sup>3</sup> He argues that the "dangerous falsehoods" offered up by "self-appointed 'terrorism experts'" such as "right-wing pundits and pastors and politicians" betray an ugly tendency for Americans to scapegoat an Other whom they do not quite understand.<sup>4</sup> While the rest of Cole's book focuses primarily on international-scale conflicts, his term "Islam Anxiety" can easily be applied to the United States' current domestic

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<sup>3</sup> Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

situation as well. Despite a 2007 Pew report's findings that American Muslims report being remarkably well adjusted, particularly in comparison to their European counterparts, even they acknowledge the effects of "Islam Anxiety."<sup>5</sup>

The report states, "A majority of Muslim Americans (53%) say it has become more difficult to be a Muslim in the U.S. since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks."<sup>6</sup> Pew finds that Muslims in America are keenly aware of the controversial discourse surrounding their faith. 54% feel "singled out" by the government for extra surveillance. Despite all this, however, Muslims reportedly feel quite comfortable in American society. They say they are generally happy with their lives and subscribe even more than the general public to the all-American notion that "most people who want to get ahead can make it if they work hard."<sup>7</sup> They see little reason why their religious beliefs should prevent them from living in a modern, democratic, Western society.<sup>8</sup> Finally and rather significantly, American Muslims are leagues beyond their counterparts in Europe with regard to assimilation. They are far less likely to fall into a low-income bracket, more likely to consider themselves "American" rather than "Muslim" first, and share the broader public's concerns about Islamic extremism – even if they do not always agree on how to properly address it.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Cost of Otherizing, Again*

If Muslims themselves are doing so well, why so much Anxiety? Michael Barkun offers one possible explanation in his paper "Religion and Secrecy After September 11." Offering

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," *Pew Research Center*, 2-3. <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

historical and contemporary evidence, he demonstrates that American Muslims are now experiencing a period of public mistrust because of a pressurized national atmosphere set by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and Islam's relative obscurity in a Christian-centric society.

...during periods of social or political tension, religious secrets, real or imagined, take on a broader and more sinister importance, for they may be seen as evidence that a religious community has unsavory beliefs or behaviors that it must hide. At that point religious secrets may be perceived as indicators of danger. We entered such a period after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Some manifestations of Islam have come to be regarded as potential threats to public security, not because of anything that can be clearly seen, but because of what some believe may be hidden from view. Thus, two phenomena may come together: attributions of secrecy and the belief that such attributions are markers of social danger...<sup>10</sup>

Other religious minorities, such as Catholics and Mormons, have likewise been subjected to ugly accusations based on speculation of "secrets". These are challenging to address because, after all, how does one prove that a secret does not exist?<sup>11</sup>

This domestic American variant of Islam Anxiety, which I will henceforth gloss as "Islamophobia," entails real consequences. Barkun writes that state secrets, which obviously hold increased power in times when "homeland security" tops the national agenda, "can become not only counterparts to but rivals of religious secrecy."<sup>12</sup> While Americans expect and enjoy

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Barkun, "Religion and Secrecy After September 11," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2006): 276.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

both individual privacy and religious freedom, there is no such thing as “religious privacy.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Christian tradition of leaving church doors open (both literally and figuratively) contributes to an attitude that communal religious activities are public rather than private.<sup>14</sup> For Muslims in the United States, this has translated into unannounced visits to mosques by FBI agents acting under the Attorney General’s Guidelines revised by John Ashcroft in 2002. Changes to the guidelines encourage mosque surveillance without either appropriate cooperation with the community or the need for the surveillance to be tied to a specific investigation.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge that, for example, an FBI agent may be posing as a fellow congregant has a demonstrated “chilling effect” on mosque attendance. It also undermines law enforcement efforts by pushing illicit activity elsewhere and eroding cooperative relations between the Bureau and the community.<sup>16</sup> This is just one example of the myriad policies that have placed Muslims in America in the role of the disruptive “Other.” I will further discuss post-9/11 Muslim life in the following chapters.

### *Analytical Framework*

Despite a recent upsurge in public interest in Islam, the research on Muslim communities in the United States remains sparse. The book I relied the most upon for analysis of the American Muslim experience was Kambiz GhaneaBassiri’s *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States*. Published a few years before the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, it mainly highlights the Muslim community’s diversity and its difficulty producing a unified voice – despite a desire to achieve

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 291, 296.

unity among all Muslims. Though much has changed since 1997, many of GhaneaBassiri's points remain useful in understanding Muslim communities.

Particularly lacking are studies on young Muslims save for those "concentrating on gender-related issues in general and veiling in particular."<sup>17</sup> One of the only books that focus exclusively on this population is Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine's *Muslim American Youth: Understanding Hyphenated Identities through Multiple Methods*. This interdisciplinary study understands "Muslim-American" identity as emerging among 12-25 year olds in the specific post-9/11 American context. Sirin and Fine have uncovered many of the key facets of growing up as a "designated other," and their findings refute the "clash of civilizations" argument that legitimates biased security policies and xenophobic attitudes toward American Muslims.

A facet of the American Muslim experience that both of the above-mentioned works fail to adequately tackle is the issue of piety. With research focusing on Muslim identities, precious little has been done to understand American Muslims' deeper relationship to their faith. Invariably this omission stems from the American tradition of extracting religion from public life. Yet many of my research subjects aspired to carry out all of their actions, without exception, for the sake of God. Every act, from prayer to studying to entering the bathroom, became imbued with a sense of piety. If anything, daily interaction with the people around them was the area most likely guided by Islamic values. This did not mean avoiding non-Muslims or attempting to impose some rigid code of conduct on an ostensibly sinful society – rather, it meant engaging openly with fellow Americans, treating all with dignity and respect. For this reason, I decided that Muslim Students Associations' outreach strategies and attitudes could not be analyzed

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<sup>17</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth : Understanding Hyphenated Identities Through Multiple Methods* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 13.

without marrying scholarly analysis of American Muslim identities to that of contemporary Islamic piety.

The sources in which I found a conceptual framework for thinking about piety were anthropological works on the Islamic revival as manifested in Egypt and Lebanon. Charles Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape* studies the phenomenon of cassette-tape sermons in Cairo, Egypt to discuss how pious Egyptians use modern technology to create "counter-public spheres" within which to negotiate their faith. In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood also writes about the Egyptian piety movement, focusing on female *da'iyat*, women who devote themselves to spreading Islamic values and correct practices. Lara Deeb's *An Enchanted Modern* about the Shia piety movement in Lebanon tells the stories of women who feel that living their faith deeply is not contradictory but rather essential to being "modern." All three of these books describe Islam outside the American context, yet many of their descriptions of Islamic revival uncovered themes and trajectories present in my own research. Furthermore, they provided me with useful analytical tools.

Saba Mahmood, in particular, challenged me to think about my fieldwork in a productive way. She starts her book off acknowledging her position in a humanities field grounded in Western liberal norms, which sometimes chafe uncomfortably against the values her research subjects espouse. For example, she critiques the feminist anthropologist's constant search for "resistance" and "subversion" of patriarchal norms when evaluating Muslim women's agency.<sup>18</sup> She writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

If there is a normative political position that underlies this book, it is to urge that we – my readers and myself – embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry.<sup>19</sup>

During my time with Muslim Students Associations, I have spent hours fighting misconceptions, fears, and biases – including my own. It’s not easy to get used to talking to conservative Muslim men who might keep their eyes on the floor throughout the conversation. It feels disconcerting no matter how many times I tell myself it is not a sign of enmity or disrespect. But it is equally as difficult to constantly ask myself whether my strong belief in the healing power of interfaith activities might lead to biased conclusions! For this reason, I have tried as much as possible to adhere to Mahmood’s position that the terms one’s research subject uses to talk about his or herself are usually the most useful.<sup>20</sup> I also tried to remain open to the possibility of my research questions morphing into something other than what I initially planned, as indeed they did.

### *Methods*

The data for this project came from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Muslim Students Associations at various private Boston-area universities. The names of all campuses and people studied during the course of this research have been changed to maintain confidentiality. While Boston-area MSAs vary in choosing to be called “X University Muslim Students Association” or “Islamic Society of X,” I have chosen the latter, more locally common

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 16.

appellation to gloss the MSAs in this study. I spent most of my time with two groups: Islamic Society of Cannondale University, a large, urban, private university, and Islamic Society of Schwinn University, a smaller private university (roughly half the size of the first) located outside the city. Some additional fieldwork was also conducted at two other universities: Islamic Society of Fisher University (a very large urban university), and Islamic Society of Needham University (a prestigious mid-sized university on the outskirts of Boston). Because of the fairly tight-knit nature of the Muslim community in Boston, I also interacted with students from many other colleges and universities throughout the area, as they attended citywide volunteer activities or visited friends at other schools.

In order to view each MSA from both a macro level and a detailed close-up, I used a mixture of participant observation and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I also monitored publicly available information on each group from sources such as their official web sites, Facebook pages, chaplaincy and university publications, and news media. Many MSAs use e-mail listservs to maintain communication outside of meetings; I received various such mailings from all but the Islamic Society of Cannondale University. These helped keep me abreast of the latest news, upcoming events, and ongoing discussions.

The participant-observation portion of this project involved attending and participating, as a general MSA member, a multiplicity of events that each MSA organizes – either formally or informally. This included regular events such as meetings, prayer services, and *halaqas* (literally “circles”; religious study groups); special events such as holiday celebrations or culture shows; co-sponsored events such as interfaith meals or dialogues; and events at other universities or community centers to which several members traveled together. Participating in (rather than simply observing) these events provided two benefits: holistic immersion into the community

and its atmosphere, and capturing a sense as to how a non-Muslim such as myself might be received in the community.

Finally, I individually interviewed various MSA using a semi-structured interview protocol that lent itself to a 1-2 hour-long interview. Questions in the interview were mostly open-ended and addressed personal identity, religious practices and attitudes, and the subject's involvement with MSA. The location and time were set personally between the interviewee and myself to facilitate a relaxed, conversational atmosphere in which answers could be personal, candid, and reflective. (Some limits to this ideal comfort level manifested themselves, particularly with male interviewees, who typically requested a public meeting-place, such as busy cafes or student centers.) I chose interviewees chosen strategically to illuminate various aspects of the community. A well-rounded set of interviewees included active board members balanced by a few "consumers" (members who do not organize events), a mix of genders, and some who represented various facets of the community, such as recent converts, non-Sunnis, international students, or lapsed members.

*Why?*

As a long-time non-Muslim member of the MSA at my home university, I have a special relationship to this research and its subjects. I met my first Muslim friend early freshman year at a charity walk in Boston. We struck up a conversation about our prospective majors (hers engineering, mine Middle Eastern studies) and Islam, since she was fasting for Ramadan at the time. When she learned what I was studying, she encouraged me to get involved with the Muslim Students Association so I could learn about Islam from Muslims' point of view. A few months later I did get involved in skits and a culture show for Tufts' 2007 Islamic Awareness Week, and the next year I was asked to step in as chair of Public Relations. Through working, living, and

building close friendships with my colleagues in the MSA, I gained an experiential knowledge of Islam, expanded social networks, and comfort interacting with students of much different backgrounds than myself. Such experience has proved invaluable during the course of this research. Demonstrating my familiarity with common terms and etiquette, as well as issues important to Muslim students often strengthened my research subjects' trust. When they understood my level of knowledge about their community, they also felt comfortable going into further detail on matters that other non-Muslims might not grasp without extensive explanation. Sometimes my participant-observation veered more toward participation, such as when I provided contact information for a potential lecturer during a board meeting of the Islamic Society of Cannondale.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, my motivations for conducting this research are deeply rooted in my own MSA experience. More than simply planning events and designing flyers, I found that joining the MSA made me responsible for explaining Islam and Muslims to everybody from my friends and classmates to my family to perfect strangers. During a retreat at the Tufts mountain lodge, I had to tell a perplexed Tufts student why she couldn't enter the room in which my Muslim friends were praying, assuring her that they would be done soon. This was the straightforward part of my job. I have also spent hours arguing against misconceptions, fears, and anti-Muslim biases. It can be exhilarating to counter outright bigotry with good information, but it can also be hard when the people you must argue against are your friends and family, and expect you to be on their side. Through these experiences I have come to feel that my Muslim peers' struggle for acceptance in the public eye is my own struggle. I felt that writing about their experiences might help my readers understand the Muslim community better. I also felt that focusing on the outreach that

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<sup>21</sup> Field notes, November 5, 2009.

MSAs engage in might help disprove the constant refrain that “Moderate Muslims” are not making enough effort to prove they are worthy of America’s trust.

This special relationship, however, has not been without its challenges. Studying and writing about one’s peers often feels awkward, even when the subjects themselves welcome the inquiry and even make jokes (“Hear those sirens? That’s the FBI coming to get you for hanging out with us!”<sup>22</sup>) to break the ice. I established an ongoing rapport with my interviewees, running into them at other events and chatting online long after the interviews were over. Sometimes it was difficult to maintain standards of confidentiality – such as when several interviewees wrote on my Facebook wall asking what their pseudonyms would be! On a more serious note, I felt overwhelmed by a sense of obligation toward my research subjects when I set out to write this thesis. How could I do justice to their contributions? Would something I wrote be spun by those with an anti-Muslim bias to reflect badly on the community? And above all, would I be able to represent their experiences without inserting too much of my own bias? Looking at a community from within can restrict one’s perspective. Due to my position within the research field, I have had to constantly test myself for assumptions and “wishful thinking.”

### *The Muslim Students Association*

MSA National is a non-profit organization that strives to facilitate networking, educating, and empowering the students of today to be citizens of tomorrow’s community.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Field notes, November 19, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> MSA National, *MSA National*, <http://www.msanational.org>.

The national Muslim Students Association (MSA) is one of the oldest and best-established Muslim organizations in North America. A conference in Illinois in 1963 led to the creation of the MSA from a federation of scattered Islamic societies started by Muslim students from various countries who sought to remain religiously active while studying in the United States. Owing to its multicultural membership, the MSA was the first large organization dedicated solely to being Muslim.<sup>24</sup> Many of its first members came from countries experiencing “political turmoil due to religious upheavals,”<sup>25</sup> and brought with them the ideas of Islamic revivalist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Mawlana Abu A’la Mawdudi: “Islam was seen as an ideology, a way of life, and a mission, and the organization was not considered simply as a way to serve the community but as a means to create an ideal community and serve Islam.”<sup>26</sup> In 1971 MSA opened its own national headquarters, and by 1975 it had developed a complex structure including outreach-oriented departments such as education and publication, and public relations.<sup>27</sup> As time passed, MSA’s agenda transformed from merely supporting Muslim students to “the establishment of permanent Muslims organizations and the propagation of Islam in the United States and Canada.”<sup>28</sup> In 1981, MSA had grown beyond its mandate and spawned the more generally oriented Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which now holds MSA under its broad umbrella.<sup>29</sup>

Today, Muslim Students Associations exist on most large college and university campuses in the US and Canada, and on many smaller ones as well. Like the first MSAs, which

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<sup>24</sup> Gutbi Madhi Ahmed, “Muslim Organizations in the United States,” in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>25</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Gutbi Madhi Ahmed, “Muslim Organizations,” 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Gutbi Madhi Ahmed, “Muslim Organizations,” 16.

were founded by international students from Muslim countries, these student-run groups exist primarily to facilitate Muslim religious life on campus.<sup>30</sup> They organize prayer services and Qu'ran study groups, petition university administrations for special meal plans to accommodate halal diets and Ramadan schedules, and they offer alternative social activities to the predominant college party scene. As many of my informants expressed, however, activities whose target audience is the non-Muslim community have become increasingly central to MSA agendas. Most MSAs participate in "interfaith" events; usually dialogues or social events intended to bring various campus faith groups together. One MSA in this study had a dedicated "Outreach Coordinator" board position.<sup>31</sup> One of the most widespread manifestations of MSAs' outreach to the non-Muslim community is "Islam Awareness Week." Conceived in the 1990s, this week of events (guest speakers or panels, informational presentations, cultural events, community service, social gatherings, etc.) can be observed yearly at numerous campuses, and has become one of the most central activities for many MSAs.<sup>32</sup> Volunteer work was another avenue for reaching out to the non-Muslim community. These efforts represented a conscious effort to shed a positive light on the Muslim community.

While "MSA National" offers guidance and resources for all MSAs, the Boston-area MSAs involved in this study were only loosely if at all affiliated.<sup>33</sup> The National chapter serves as a resource for local campus chapters and also conducts some of its own programming. Local Muslim Students Associations (MSAs) exist on a large number of college campuses (and high schools) across the United States and Canada, and many more exist than are officially affiliated with MSA National. For example, only one Massachusetts campus is listed as an affiliated MSA,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad, interview, February 1, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> MSA National, *Islam Awareness Week Resource Center*, <http://iaw.msanational.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> MSA National, *MSA National*, <http://www.msanational.org>.

but over the past four years I have encountered students involved with MSAs at Tufts University, Harvard University, MIT, University of Massachusetts/Boston, Boston University, Boston College, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, Simmons College, and Northeastern University. Many of them have chosen the name “Islamic Society of...” rather than “X University Muslim Students Association. In the Frequently Asked Questions section on its official website, MSA National claims to avoid “micromanaging work at the chapter level”. However, it does offer numerous suggestions and resources for chapters, whether affiliated or not, to direct their efforts toward activities like “Islam Awareness Week” and “Project Downtown”.<sup>34</sup> The MSAs I studied appeared to lack a close relationship with the MSA National, though individual members felt comfortable participating in national events such those held at the yearly ISNA convention, for example.

#### *The MSAs in this study*

Each Muslim Students Association included in this study bore a unique character. They do not constitute mere cookie-cutter copies of a national prototype, but rather organic institutions shaped by each university’s demographics, the resources available to student groups or campus chaplaincies, and institutional memory. The small size of most MSAs in this study increased individual students’ power to pursue projects of their own invention. Here is a short review of the MSAs studied through the lens of my fieldwork.

The Islamic Society of Cannondale University served a population of roughly 20,000 students at a private urban university. The university’s sizeable international student population was reflected in MSA membership, as was a significant and influential group of students from a certain Boston suburb. This local population brought a certain element of informality and free

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

mixing between genders due to prior familiarity. The total membership of any MSA was impossible to estimate, but board meetings brought together about ten members, regular *halaqas* drew about twenty, and the largest gathering I observed was about 100 students. Cannondale devoted considerable resources to religious and interfaith activities on campus, most obviously illustrated by a recently renovated multifaith space, beautifully appointed, and centrally located. This space included ablution sinks, carpets, and a small curtained *musallah* (prayer room), which students often used to pray between classes. The Islamic Society also had its own small office, located in the same building as the multifaith space. The imam of a local mosque served as the Muslim chaplain alongside seven other chaplains and a sizeable staff. This chaplain seemed very involved in the MSA, attending many *halaqas* and interfaith activities, and making himself available to students on a regular basis.

The Islamic Society of Schwinn University was a much smaller group culled from about 5,000 undergraduates and about the same number of graduate students, located outside the city. This MSA lacked the large international presence of Cannondale, and American students hailed mainly from the Northeast. Most students, domestic and international, were ethnically South Asian, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani. The board contained about ten positions, which along with a handful of other students constituted the main active group. The geographic focal point of this MSA appeared to be the campus Muslim culture house, where eight Muslim students resided, several of them MSA board members. This culture house provided a comfortable living environment for Muslim students, offering a prayer room, privacy and gender separation by floor, pork- and substance-free living, and a focal point for socialization and some MSA activities such as *halaqas*. (Many students at other universities were surprised by the co-ed nature of this living space.) Schwinn's administration showed a less hands-on approach toward

faith groups than Cannondale. Schwinn did have a Muslim chaplain, but relations between the chaplain and the MSA remained tepid at best. Schwinn MSA members therefore maintained interfaith contacts directly with fellow students and other chaplains. The university had also recently built a multifaith center, which the MSA used for Friday prayer and some events. However, it remained locked throughout much of the day, and its inconvenient location rendered it useless for day-to-day prayer and meetings.

I conducted fieldwork with the Islamic Society of Fisher University at an interesting point in its history. Fisher's MSA served over 30,000 students in an urban setting. Apart from Ramadan iftars, this MSA's activities had ground to a halt due to the unexpected absence of its president. When I attended my first meeting there in November – the third month of the semester – board members were in the penultimate stages of completely restructuring its organization and activities under the leadership of a very driven young man who had stepped in. This president set far and away the most highly organized and formal MSA atmosphere I experienced during the course of research. Meetings were conducted in a very orderly fashion, always opening with a *dua* or prayer. The new institutional system he envisioned was highly hierarchical, as opposed to the more flat organizations at Cannondale and Schwinn. Indeed, this president resembled an efficient dictator compared to his counterparts. The Islamic Society at Fisher also differed from the others in terms of gender relations; women were more likely to wear *hijab*, and gender separation appeared more pronounced. The MSA maintained a small *musallah* in the campus center, divided by a folding screen and having one entrance for each sex. A religious studies Ph. D. candidate and faculty member served as Muslim chaplain.

## Chapter 2: The University Umma: Post-9/11 Muslim Youth Identity

This chapter will sketch individual experiences and general trends in the identities of the Muslim students I studied, primarily using data collected during one-on-one interviews with members of various MSAs. The students shared a common post-9/11 American experience of religious freedom, social marginalization, transnational ties, and racialization. They strove toward an ideal pan-Muslim unity, but had to contend with a huge diversity within their own community.

### *The Muslim Student in America*

It would be surprisingly easy to describe Muslim students at U.S. colleges and universities in only one word if one was forced to; that word is diversity. Muslim students come from every race, nationality, and socioeconomic status. Many, as in the founding days of the Muslim Student Association, come as international students from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Others are the children or grandchildren of immigrants from those same countries. A modest amount of African American Muslims, descended from slaves and converted mainly during the early twentieth century, joins a growing number of recent converts from European or Hispanic cultural backgrounds.<sup>35</sup> The “assertion of a universal Islam serves as an elusive ideal

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<sup>35</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 1, 142.

for many Muslims,”<sup>36</sup> an ideal that most modern scholars of the community acknowledge as unattained and perhaps unattainable: Muslims in America (and thus Muslim students in America) represent a riotous variety of conceptions of Islam. One can find Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, and “just Muslim” Muslims; followers of Ahmadiyya, the Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, and W.D. Mohammed; devout, questioning, and non-practicing Muslims who nevertheless hold fast to their Muslim identity. There is no central Islamic authority in the United States, and many Muslims cherish the absolute freedom to interpret Islam for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, Muslims on campus have certain things in common. They represent a leading elite – in a number of different ways. As college students, they belong to a pre-professional community and will become the next middle class and socioeconomic elites of American society (or whatever country they traveled from, if they decide to return.) If they belong to their local chapter of the Muslim Students Association, they represent an elite within their religious community. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri cites Yvonne Haddad and Raymond Williams in reporting that, “about 80 to 90 percent of the total Muslim populations is ‘unmosqued’,”<sup>38</sup> that is, the vast majority of Muslims do not affiliate themselves with any Muslim institution. That makes MSA members part of a small, but growing<sup>39</sup> number of Muslims who are publicly asserting and shaping their religious identities. They share the status of a religious minority, and all the challenges that accompany that status. All shared the common experience of being Muslim in the United States, post-9/11, during the formative years of their youth. The importance of Islam in some of these students' identities has come to overshadow other facets in this context; Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine quote a Muslim comedian as quipping, “We went to bed white on 9/10

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>39</sup> Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street*, 191.

and got up 'Muslim' on 9/11."<sup>40</sup> MSA members especially carry the burden of representing and defending their religion in a highly charged public arena. At the same time, it would be a mistake to view Muslim students' activities as driven merely by identity politics. I found that the majority of my research subjects took their faith quite seriously, and that Muslim Students Associations were arenas for working out deep questions of religion and piety. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, even outreach activities became imbued with a sense of piety and service to God.

### *Unity and Diversity*

As a function of the limited area in which I researched, I encountered a particular mix of Muslims, which did not evenly reflect a cross-section of Muslim America as a whole. Half of my interviewees were first or second generation immigrants of South Asian origin (primarily with roots in Pakistan or Bangladesh.) This reflected the largest ethnic group within the MSAs I studied. The Islamic Society of Schwinn University comprised nearly entirely Bengalis and Pakistanis, with the majority holding American citizenship. Arabs constituted the next largest group at the Islamic Societies of Cannondale and Fisher Universities. Cannondale especially had a large pocket of active international students from Saudi Arabia. Other ethnic groups represented in small quantities included recent African immigrants (especially Somalis whose families had fled violence in the 90s), students of Persian origin, and white Americans of mixed European origin.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

*Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 22, 2007), <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

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<sup>40</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 7.

African-American Muslims (meaning those who could trace their American lineage back several generations) and Hispanic Muslims were virtually non-existent in the MSAs I studied.

I asked each interviewee, “What is the first thing you would say to identify yourself – like if you were writing an autobiography or something like that? What would be the first thing, or the first few things, you would say?” The majority (seven out of twelve) responded initially with “Muslim,” or “Muslim” hyphenated with something else (e.g. “Muslim-American”). Most went on to add other elements ranging from “sophomore in college”<sup>41</sup> to “daughter” to “American citizen.”<sup>42</sup> These students felt that Islam was the most important part of their identity, and their responses hinted toward the universalistic, global concept of the “umma,” or Islamic nation.<sup>43</sup> One female respondent said, “Ideally I’m just Muslim. . . . I like the idea that despite different backgrounds, we’re all Muslim. It’s like a family.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the *umma* takes on traits of a pan-ethnic identity as described by Ann Kim and Michael White:

The attraction of the notion of panethnicity lies in the recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity within its boundaries. For the panethnic group, boundaries expand beyond national origins to encompass a range of groups perceived to share some structural or cultural traits.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Izdihar, interview, November 12, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Basma, interview, November 13, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> “While recognizing differences in status, wealth, and tribal origin, the Quran teaches the ultimate supratribal (transnational) unity and equality of all believers before God. Common faith, not tribal or family ties, binds the community together.” -- John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Samira, interview, January 16, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Ann Kim and Michael White, “Panethnicity, Ethnic Diversity and Residential Segregation” (Brown University, 2005), Google Scholar, [http://grads.soc.brown.edu/faculty/papers/Kim-White-Glick\\_Panethnicity-2005.pdf](http://grads.soc.brown.edu/faculty/papers/Kim-White-Glick_Panethnicity-2005.pdf), 1.

Although all but two of my interviewees identified as Sunni, most of these preferred to present themselves as “just Muslim.”<sup>46</sup> “My practices would classify me as Sunni, but I don’t like to put up those barriers,”<sup>47</sup> said one MSA member, summing up the general attitude toward sects. Another specifically said, “I don’t think Shi’a are heretics.”<sup>48</sup> A third made a linguistic jump between *Sunni*, the sect, and “Sunna,” a term for the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad: “*Sunna*, if I understand the word correctly, it means how the Prophet lived, so I basically follow that.”<sup>49</sup> In this way, he stressed a universal aspect of Islam rather than a fundamental difference between the two sects – Shia Muslims also look to the Prophet Muhammad as an example for their behavior. Other commonalities included late comprehension of the differences in practices and beliefs among Muslims, asserting that they had nothing against members of a different sect, and hesitation to divulge sectarian identity unless specifically asked. Indeed, GhaneaBassiri notes the “general Muslim community’s aversion toward distinctions between Muslims based on doctrines.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, the students appeared to uphold the Sunni principle of withholding judgment of their peers’ faith – “enforcing a normative morality” is not up to any one individual or group, but rather each believer answers directly to God for his or her actions and intentions.<sup>51</sup>

Like any generalization about Islam, this permissive attitude toward minority believers must be problematized. I found that while it facilitated genuinely positive relations between individuals with different ideologies, the MSA as an institution struggles to accommodate

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<sup>46</sup> Maria, interview, January 25, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Aisha, interview, February 22, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Hamza, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Iqbal, interview, November 19, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 39.

doctrinal pluralism. Ultimately, this mirrors Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's observation that despite a strong desire for unity of the *umma* the US Muslim community has trouble working together as a united front.<sup>52</sup> For example, Sunni Muslims dominate MSA and make little room for minority Shi'a practices or thought.<sup>53</sup> A page entitled "The Pledge of Mutual Respect and Cooperation" on the MSA National website endorses the ideological unity of all Sunni Muslims – but not of Shi'ites.<sup>54</sup> During an interview with the public relations officer for the Islamic Society of Fisher University, she mentioned that there were Twelver and Ismaili Shi'a students involved. Of possible conflict, she said, "It doesn't really get tense. People understand that drama won't be received well."<sup>55</sup> Yet an MSA executive board meeting of her MSA, I witnessed a debate between two members over whether to include Ahmadiyya<sup>56</sup> in an Islam Awareness Week themed on the diverse sects of non-Sunni Islam. In the end they decided not to include Ahmadiyya because it was too controversial and "out there" – thereby withholding official acknowledgement of that sect.<sup>57</sup>

I observed a tentative relationship between the MSAs and Sufism (mystical Islam). A few members identified as having Sufi leanings. One member of the Islamic Society of Schwinn University, who served as Vice President of Religious Affairs as a sophomore, organized an Eid al-Fitr celebration. Rather than the typical keynote speaker, the student invited a group of Sufi disciples to lead the attendees in a Sufi "dhikr"<sup>58</sup>. The unique event was generally well received by the community and the MSA. However, a senior board member later explained that some

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<sup>52</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 184.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> MSA National, *MSA National*, <http://www.msanational.org/pledge/>.

<sup>55</sup> Samira, interview.

<sup>56</sup> A minority sect of Islam originating in South Asia

<sup>57</sup> Field notes, November 19, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> "Remembrance of God," a form of worship usually involving recitation of the names of God.

attendees felt “weirded out” by the *dhikr*. The Sufi style was much faster than what most Muslims were used to, and they found it hard to follow. “It was nothing like what people saw before. Muslims want to be very careful about how... they want to avoid *bida’a* [innovation].”<sup>59</sup> Still, even though a few people felt uncomfortable, the MSA members trusted and backed the student in charge, and no major backlash occurred.

A *dhikr* led by the Muslim chaplain at the same school the next semester stirred up much more frustration among MSA members. The senior member quoted above commented, “[The student who had organized the Eid event] was weirded out by [the chaplain]’s thing – he said, ‘That’s not the protocol of Sufi *dhikr*.’ Usually these things are very kind of solemn and people are reflecting on their own, read a *juz’* [section of the Qu’ran] on their own on the dead person’s behalf. That’s the mainstream way. [The chaplain] was kind of singing it, some people thought it became more of like a spectacle than a reflection.”<sup>60</sup> Another board member said, “Everyone doesn’t like [the chaplain]. ... I mean [the chaplain] didn’t have bad intentions, but I feel like it should have been someone else who took on the role of saying the *dhikr*. ... Some people in MSA exaggerate too much and say that [the chaplain] sinned or whatever, but I don’t go that far with it.”<sup>61</sup> All seemed to feel that the chaplain had overstepped the bounds of good taste in deviating from what the majority of students felt comfortable with. The MSA welcomed Sufi students, but any experimentation with unorthodox rituals in a group setting was bound to arouse voices of protest.

I encountered a few Shi’a MSA members during the course of research, but I saw none actively assert their identity as such. When asked how diverse their MSA was, most interviewees

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<sup>59</sup> Basma, interview, March 26, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Rahim, interview, January 27, 2010.

would often say something like, “I think there are some Shiites... But I’m not really sure.” It seemed that Sunni and Shi’a members alike rendered Shi’ism virtually invisible among the Sunni majority. I interviewed one Shia MSA member, Rahim. Rahim was born to Iranian-American parents and belonged to the largest subset of Shi’a Islam, the “Ithna ‘Ashariyya” or Twelver sect. He held a board position in his MSA, and got along well with his Sunni compatriots. “I didn’t really want to get that involved, because I didn’t know what the goal of the MSA was. ... And then I got to know people and they were pretty cool, pretty devout.”<sup>62</sup> Mirroring his peers’ comments, he stated that he didn’t think there was anything wrong with being Sunni: “To me, sects are not that important.”<sup>63</sup> When I asked how it was different being a minority in MSA versus being part of the large Iranian community in which he grew up, he replied, “It’s not that hard, it’s fine. I mean I get into arguments with [a certain Sunni friend] all the time.”<sup>64</sup> I laughed, knowing the opinionated student he was talking about, “But everybody does!” He continued,

Exactly, but yeah, it’s fine because it’s [Sunni Islam] pretty similar. There are small differences, and to me the small things mean a lot. But I think everyone has good intentions, so it’s fine... It’s majority Sunni in the world... I’ve gone to other mosques which were Sunni... now it’s fine. It was just weird, new for the first year.

I don’t mind praying behind a Sunni, but their prayers are different, so it’s kind of difficult to keep up with them. So I usually don’t. It’s not like it’s forbidden. When I do

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

do it, I just pray by myself. I still stand with them – ‘cause it’s rude not to, but I just do what I do.<sup>65</sup>

Rahim went to Friday prayer at school only infrequently, and usually attended Shia services nearby at his hometown mosque. He would also go home for the various Shia holidays, none of which were observed by the MSA. When I asked what he wished was different about his MSA, he said he wished they could have more religious events, such as the many days of the imams that he observed in his home community. I said, “You could suggest, let’s celebrate this.” He laughed and replied, “At lot of times it’s mourning though, so I don’t know if we could *celebrate* it. If it’s mourning, you have to have people who are actually into it.”<sup>66</sup> He seemed to feel that it would be impossible, with only one other Shia member, for his MSA to observe Shia holidays. He felt that these commemorations, due to their solemn nature, would not lend themselves to inter-sectarian cooperation – as though common ground could only be found in the context of light, celebratory rituals. Rahim enjoyed participating in his MSA and looked upon it as a resource, and he seemed to feel accepted and welcome. However, the doctrinal differences between himself and his Sunni counterparts clearly impeded his ability to find full religious expression within the MSA institution. He sensed the limitations of the group in accommodating his beliefs and practices. Rather than actively work for more Shi’a accommodation, he instead stepped back where his practices conflicted with the majority. Unlike most of his counterparts, however, Rahim was lucky enough to have convenient access to an established Shi’a community.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly for an organization that attracted the most religious Muslims on campus, I observed regular non-Muslim participation at two of the MSAs I studied. Non-Muslim students often showed up to events, especially cultural events, interfaith gatherings, and large holiday celebrations. Some were an MSA member's friend from class, and others came because of their interest in international relations, comparative religion, or the arts. My first involvement with the Muslim Students Association was acting in skits and organizing a culture show for Islam Awareness Week. Two other non-Muslim students also participated. During fieldwork at the Islamic Society of Cannondale University, I met two non-Muslim girls who attended a variety of events, from interfaith dinners to halaqas. I was told that one had taken interest in Islam since attending an Islam Awareness Week event where a panel of converts spoke and answered questions. The assumption was that she was on her way to becoming Muslim.<sup>67</sup> The second girl I found joking around in broken Arabic with some of the Arab MSA members.<sup>68</sup> She said she was dating a Bahraini and wanted to learn more about his home culture. She also worked at the university chaplaincy office. It was unclear whether she was considering conversion. I heard from the president of the Islamic Society of Schwinn University that a couple of non-Muslim girls had joined in congregational prayer during a Ramadan *iftar* [fast-breaking meal] to welcome new freshmen at the beginning of the year. She had found their inquisitiveness odd yet endearing, and obligingly supplied them with scarves.<sup>69</sup>

Non-Muslims arguably felt more comfortable participating in the MSA than non-orthodox Muslims. Though their relationship to Islam was weaker, they benefited from low expectations and a welcoming atmosphere. As one of these non-Muslim participants myself, I

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<sup>67</sup> Field notes, January 25, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Field notes, November 2, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Basma, interview, March 28, 2010.

experienced first-hand the relative ease with which I was accepted into each group – albeit as an outsider who received special attention. Happily, most of this special attention consisted of curiosity and an eagerness to talk about Islam, rather than the suspicion for which I had braced myself. Students often anticipated my faux pas, and quickly forgave those they failed to head off. Several interviewees said that non-Muslims were part of MSA activities’ intended audience, and some expressed hopes that more non-Muslims would get involved in the future. There are several possible motivations for this embrace of non-Muslim involvement. The first is a desire to rectify Islam’s negative public image. One MSA member said, “They are more than welcome to come and see what we’re about, what we’re doing, for example we’re all getting ready for Islamic Awareness Month. I don’t know if you’d call that a ‘key component...’ It’s like an umbrella to our whole [MSA] life. You know, it lets the campus know that Muslims aren’t the people you see in the media.”<sup>70</sup> MSA members seemed to feel that each small conversation they had would help clear misconceptions, allay fears, and ultimately lead to a better public image for Islam and Muslims. Sharing the Islamic faith is a second motivation for openness toward non-Muslims. I will discuss “da’wa,” or call to Islam, further in Chapter Three.

### *Talfiq and the Information Age*

Only two out of eight Sunni interviewees pinpointed a specific “madhhab” (school of Islamic jurisprudence)<sup>71</sup> they followed. One said he followed a “mostly Hanafi” “smattering,” which he attributed to his South Asian family heritage.<sup>72</sup> The other, a recent convert, guessed,

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<sup>70</sup> Iqbal, interview, December 1, 2009.

<sup>71</sup> There are four main schools of Sunni jurisprudence: Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi’i. Each stipulates a slightly different reading of Islamic law, diverging mainly on subtle details of practice.

<sup>72</sup> Muhammad, interview, February 2, 2010.

“Maybe Maliki?”<sup>73</sup> She said that the friend from whom she had learned to pray adhered to the Maliki school, but that she might have learned other practices and beliefs from others who might not be Maliki. “You make up your own...”<sup>74</sup> Even these students, the ones apparently most aware of their *madhhab*, reported ambiguity in their practices and did not stress the importance of consistently adhering to one school. Most of my other research subjects either did not know or did not bother to mention which *madhhab* they followed. These findings reflect what Saba Mahmood has identified as “*talfiq*,” “an increasing flexibility displayed toward one’s fidelity to a *madhhab* in twentieth-century Islam.” With the advent of texts that compile the various *madhhabs*’ positions on each issue, the average Muslim may now choose which position he or she favors and easily cite authoritative sources in its support.<sup>75</sup> The choice of one position over another does not necessarily reflect reliance upon a single *madhhab*.

My interviewees’ acceptance of what Mahmood calls “*talfiq*” [literally “piecing together”]<sup>76</sup> occurs in the context of another modern phenomenon she describes: the growing religious literacy of Muslims around the world. Mahmood, Hirschkind, and Lara Deeb have all noted the importance of mass-mediated Islamic knowledge in shaping today’s piety movements. Today’s Muslims have access to a plethora of Islamic information, making them “increasingly well-versed in doctrinal arguments and theological concepts that were hitherto confined to the domain of religious specialists.”<sup>77</sup> Classical texts have been reorganized into concise, readable,

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<sup>73</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>76</sup> “*Talfiq*.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*., edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2323>.

<sup>77</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 79.

indexed formats<sup>78</sup>; anybody interested may access Islamic courses, consult religious scholars, and read the Qu'ran in virtually any language worldwide on the internet. As Charles Hirschkind describes in *The Ethical Soundscape*, recorded sermons bring Islamic knowledge to living rooms, taxicabs, and anyone with an iPod.

My research subjects not only demonstrated their place in this new Islamic information paradigm through their use of “Ummah Films”<sup>79</sup> during Islam Awareness Week events and podcast lectures during *halaqas*, but also actively participated in the dissemination of information sources. Many Muslim Students Associations maintain a website, where they typically publish contact information and upcoming events. Some also post daily prayer times, Muslim-specific campus guides for incoming students, or information about Islam for non-Muslims – often linking to outside Islamic websites. E-mail lists act as another mode of transmission for events, discussions, and breaking news. The Muslim Students Association at MIT administers eight different e-lists, including lists designated for each undergraduate class, graduate students, “sisters,” and general discussion. More than just channels of official transmission, these lists often become sites of speedy and agile community mobilization and also of discussion and debate. An e-list debate over the age of the Prophet’s young wife Aisha and its significance exemplified this aspect of MSA life. In a rapid-fire succession of e-mails over the course of a few hours, several students presented their diverse viewpoints, grounded in research of authoritative sources and individual use of Islamic scholarly concepts. Indeed, an Information Age paradigm shaped the style and content of the discourse in which MSA members participated.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> “Ummah Films” are a series of humorous, educational video clips on topics relevant to Muslims, especially in a post-9/11 context. They are available on YouTube.com and Google video. Baba Ali, “Ummah Films - Baba Ali,” 2006, <http://www.ummahfilms.com/>.

*Race, Islam, and American National Identity*

In *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*, Karen Brodtkin argues that social identity in the United States depends on ethnoracial classification, and that new immigrants to the United States have always struggled with assimilating to or resisting the powerful “white” American national identity.<sup>80</sup> “Assignment” is the

...popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified. We construct ethnoracial identities ourselves, but we do it within the context of ethnoracial assignment.<sup>81</sup>

Brodtkin asserts that white ethnoracial status is a

...core constitutive myth of the American nation... a civic discourse about who is to be numbered among the nation’s real citizens... The other half of this discourse, about who is to be excluded and policed as a dangerous outsider to civil society, depends on evoking the danger of people out of place, of alien savages poised to invade the nation.<sup>82</sup>

She also describes a condition she calls “racial middleness,” that is, being between the two orienting poles of race in America – black and white.<sup>83</sup> Her book focuses on the Jewish-

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<sup>80</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

American journey from “colored” to white. “Muslim” denotes a religious, not a racial, identity, but Brodtkin’s observations are relevant here for two reasons.

First, most of the MSA members in my study belonged to some kind of ethnic minority – mostly South Asian or Middle Eastern, which I would argue both experience “racial middleness.” South Asians were classified by the US Supreme Court as “Caucasian” (but not white) in a 1923 decision, *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*.<sup>84</sup> On official forms, they now bounce back and forth between “Caucasian” and “Asian.”<sup>85</sup> Middle Eastern peoples are officially classified as “white” with more certainty. In his book *Whitewashed*, John Tehranian argues that being “white under the law”<sup>86</sup> while appearing racially other to their neighbors deprives ethnically Middle Eastern Americans of legal recourse against the discrimination they have increasingly faced since 9/11.<sup>87</sup> It allows “selective racialization”: “When they conform to social norms or achieve success in American society, they are perceived as nothing more than white. When they transgress, they are racialized as Middle Eastern.”<sup>88</sup> By this logic, practicing Muslims are much more likely to be racialized, as their religious activity stands at odds with mainstream America.

Secondly, Muslim identity and race (black, Arab, Asian, white) have become confused in the post-9/11 context. African-American writer Ishmael Reed wrote a short piece called, “The

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<sup>84</sup> “Not All Caucasians Are White: The Supreme Court Rejects Citizenship for Asian Indians,” *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5076/>.

<sup>85</sup> Nafees A. Syed, “Reclaiming my identity,” *CNN.com*, March 31, 2010, sec. Opinion, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/03/31/syed.who.am.i/index.html>.

<sup>86</sup> John Tehranian, *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Rest of Us Are Arab,” which describes being “caught in the net meant for Arab-Americans”<sup>89</sup> a few months after 9/11:

My mother named me after her favorite cousin, and a few weeks ago at the St. Louis airport, the salesperson asked me whether I was a Muslim. I said no, but when I arrived at the baggage claims section at the San Francisco airport, I noticed that mine was the only luggage with a red tag attached to it. Maybe the red tag meant “this is a wonderful person,” but how would I know? ... Within two weeks after the WTC and Pentagon bombings, my youngest daughter, Tennessee, was called a dirty Arab, twice.<sup>90</sup>

With American Muslims generally hailing from non-white ethnoracial backgrounds, anybody whose skin tone ranges from Mediterranean olive to black might be “suspected” of Muslimness. Muslims are often assumed to be Arab, Arabs are typically assumed to be Muslim, and virtually anybody lacking European or East Asian features might be assumed to be either or both! (Never mind the Muslim Chinese Uyghurs or the largest Muslim country, Indonesia.) With this convoluted system of racial-religious classification, “Muslim” very nearly becomes a race. In “The Race is On: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination,” Moustafa Bayoumi posits that Muslims and Arabs in America have become a race – rather than an ethnicity.<sup>91</sup> As opposed

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<sup>89</sup> Ishmael Reed, “The Rest of Us Are Arab,” in *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 122.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>91</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi, “The Race Is On: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination,” *Middle East Report Online*, March 2010, [http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/bayoumi\\_interv.html](http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/bayoumi_interv.html).

to ethnicities, “Races, however, have little to no agency. Agencies rather formulate policies about them. Races do not make history. They are history. Social forces pulsate through them.”<sup>92</sup>

The many immigrants and children of immigrants were indeed working to negotiate their belonging in American society with “whiteness” as a point of reference. Indeed, the only possible antonym for a racialized Muslim identity was “white,” as illustrated, ironically, by my only interviewee of European descent. When asked how she would identify herself, she replied, “I would answer differently depending on who I was talking to; I’d identify to Muslims as a Muslim – maybe I’d say, ‘Salaam Aleykum.’ To a *white – oops – non-Muslim*, that would be more of an ordeal, I’d have to explain things.”<sup>93</sup> [Emphasis mine.] Achieving whiteness was in some ways a goal for my interviewees. Some avoided blatant displays of Muslimness, such as wearing visible religious symbols or garb. Preferring to show their faith through behaviors and actions, they strived to dress modestly (yet unobtrusively) and treat others according to Islamic values. One interviewee of Syrian descent said he didn’t “intentionally look Muslim” and often passed as a “regular white guy.”<sup>94</sup> This kind of behavior approximates what John Tehranian calls “covering”: “the purposeful act of toning down traits that identify them with a stigmatized group.”<sup>95</sup> One student presented covering as one of two options available to him post-9/11: “The spotlight has been non-stop in the past nine years, there’s more pressure to represent Islam – either act like a good Muslim or try to blend in.”<sup>96</sup> Often, the same individual chooses both at different times.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Hamza, interview.

<sup>95</sup> John Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 77.

<sup>96</sup> Abdallah, interview, January 28, 2010.

*Transnational Identities in Post-9/11 America*

Due to their status as primarily first- and second-generation immigrants to the United States, a large number of my research subjects participated in or had experienced transnational communities. James Hollifield writes, “According to Sassen and others, the rise of transnational economies has resulted in the creation of transnational communities... linking communities in the country of origin to those in the country of destination.”<sup>97</sup> Students’ experiences ranged from being immigrants themselves (as in the case of Azam, a Bengali student I will discuss more in the next chapter), to living in more or less concentrated immigrant communities, to grappling with an attachment to their parents’ memory of “home” while growing up in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Like their religious identities, these transnational ties complicate these students’ lives and drag them further into the maelstrom of contentious national discourses. Their identities are not just discussed or attacked in the public forum, but also formed by what occurs there.

Aisha’s parents left Somalia for Toronto, Canada shortly before civil war broke out in their home country in 1991. Her family later moved to Portland, Maine to join a burgeoning Somali refugee population. (I asked whether they had immigrated with refugee status, but she was unsure. What was clear was that they obtained American citizenship and did not intend to return to Somalia.) Aisha lived among other Muslim immigrants in both Toronto and Portland, but she described the Portland community (sometimes informally referred to as the “Somali Republic of Maine”) as less diverse but more religious. Her family would often attend mosque services together on the weekends, and she described Islam as thriving among her peers. “I’ve

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<sup>97</sup> James F. Hollifield, “Migration, Trade, and the Nation-State,” in *The Migration Reader: Exploring Politics and Policy*, ed. Anthony Messina and Gallya Lahav (Boulder Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 176.

experienced more Somali imams – they all have roughly the same style, and they all speak to the youth, which is good.”<sup>98</sup> Aisha herself started to take her faith more seriously on her eighteenth birthday. She knew about the Muslim Students Association before enrolling at Schwinn University; her older sister had graduated from high school with another Somali student who went to Schwinn. This student offered to meet with Aisha and introduce her to other Muslims when she visited the campus. Aisha participated in her university’s Africana center as well as the MSA, and she often looked for ways to combine efforts between the two. For Aisha, who identified as “Muslim” first, Islam seemed to provide a stable identity that conveniently knitted together her challenging transnational status as “Somali” and “American.”<sup>99</sup>

A few students reported less comfortable relationships to the transnational ties they had experienced. A student at Fisher University verbally unraveled the twisted threads of her transnational identity:

I’m Bengali, but I was raised in Kuwait. My mom’s side of the family has Arab members, but both of my parents were born in Bangladesh. We moved to the US when I was ten... Ideally I’m just Muslim, but I’m not the ideal Muslim woman; so it’s a mix. I’m a Bengali Muslim... a Bengali-American Muslim... There’s an identity crisis for students coming in from outside.<sup>100</sup>

She felt deep connections to South Asian, Arab, and American culture, and described struggling between a life of partying and dating and an urge to become a better person – a more pious

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<sup>98</sup> Aisha, interview.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Samira, interview.

Muslim.<sup>101</sup> Another member of Hamza’s MSA had grown up in New York attending a Pakistani mosque where most of the sermons were in Urdu. Having been raised speaking English and Malayalam (another South Asian language), she was frustrated that she could not understand most of the services, which were, in addition, becoming increasingly political. Her family disliked the mosque’s growing conservatism, but they continued to go because of the social network they had built around the faith community there.<sup>102</sup>

Hamza grew up in a supportive Muslim community outside Boston. A child of two Syrian immigrants, he embraced his Arab identity by following Arab politics, wearing a kefiyya, and teaching Arabic on the weekends. “I’m pretty Arab!”<sup>103</sup> he said with a grin. On the downside, Hamza said he felt like he was, “living in the East at home and the West outside.” Hamza fit Sirin and Fine’s archetype of a certain subset of young Muslims, who report, “*parallel* and relatively non-intersecting lives, between which they commute.”<sup>104</sup> These Muslims typically feel they must constantly switch between two lives, wearing one hat for their friends and another for their parents, but they nevertheless identify strongly with both “their home cultures and mainstream U.S. culture.”<sup>105</sup> For Hamza in particular, Islam remained the constant factor in his identity whether at home or at school. I argue that far from isolating its adherents from American society, a universalistic Muslim identity can actually help to reconcile national and transnational identities by making Muslims members of a larger community not defined by ethnicity or nationality.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Izdihar, interview.

<sup>103</sup> Hamza, interview.

<sup>104</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 150.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 144.

Rahim, an Iranian-American student, lived among a sizeable Persian community in Massachusetts. He and his parents visited their family in Iran every year or two, and his grandmother had once stayed with them in America for over six months. “She really affected me. She’s very religious, she taught me a lot of things.”<sup>106</sup> He described “back in Iran” as both a source of religious values and a battlefield for Islam. He claimed that he gave money to people on the street more often in Iran than in the U.S. because he doubted their motivations less, and that this practice was more common in Iran because “people are religious.”<sup>107</sup> In his experience, Iranians believed in karma, and beggars would often pray for those who gave to them. On the other hand, Rahim criticized Ayatollah Khamenei for letting power corrupt him and lead him to kill people and commit other un-Islamic abuses. He had the impression that in reaction, Iranians were turning away from Islam: “In Iran, my family is pretty religious; in Iran it’s come to the point where no one wants to be religious anymore because the government like enforces it.”<sup>108</sup>

The thing with Iranians is that they say they’re religious, but deep down, it’s not actually there. They don’t actually believe in what they’re showing. I shouldn’t say this, but it’s just the truth. Iran’s 90 percent Muslim, but 20 percent are really Muslim. One of my mom’s friends was very religious ten years ago, but here she just, she took everything off, she’s a different person now.<sup>109</sup>

Rahim could understand why people in his community behaved this way. Escaping Iran’s oppression made shedding a headscarf cathartic on the plane to America, and American social

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<sup>106</sup> Rahim, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

pressures can spell doom for strict religious adherence. Nevertheless, he felt giving up Islam was wrong. From his comments that MSA events should be open to people of all faith backgrounds and that Islam's continuing growth was a very positive development, I might surmise that he hoped to replace those lost Iranian Muslims with new ones.<sup>110</sup>

Basma, president of Schwinn University MSA, was born just outside Boston to Bengali parents. At the age of seven, Basma spent a year with her extended family in Bangladesh while her mother took a dream job in Geneva. Basma looks back on this year as one of the happiest in her life, and recalls feeling bitter when she and her mother moved back to the Boston area.

...I had grown very attached to my aunt and cousins, and I didn't want to come. So not so much me disliking America, me just disliking being pulled away from an environment that I had grown very comfortable with. ... I missed the noise of the streets, it was so quiet here... And so from then on I had this like, "Yeah Bangladesh, that's where I belong..."<sup>111</sup>

She described her younger self as "very nationalistic" with regard to Bangladesh, rather than to the country of which she was a citizen by birth and had in truth spent most of her life in.

Reflecting on her high school years, Basma found a turning point in her spiritual self. She said high school was "not that great." She compared her teenage experience to *Catcher in the Rye*, saying "phony" and "superficial" things had bothered her a lot. She began praying and fasting more regularly during high school, even attempting to arrange a way to pray between classes. It seems that this search for the genuine led Basma deeper into her faith.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Basma, interview.

And I think that's when my "Bangladesh! Bangladesh!" thing got slowly replaced by, "No, it's not Bangladesh that I relate so much to, it's Islam that I relate to." And the elements of Bangladesh that I like actually relate to what comes from Islam, not so much inherent to Bangladesh.<sup>112</sup>

This transition from an identity primarily defined by her Bangladeshi roots to something she saw as more universal – Islam – helped her see her home country and Bangladesh in a different light.

As I've lived in the US I've really, really come to appreciate the society... I'm really starting to embrace my American identity, meaning the principles that came out from the Founding Fathers. A lot of great principles and ideas came out of [American] society. Not everything... Just like not everything I like about Bangladeshi society. So that's me currently.<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, Basma's formative experience in Bangladesh seems to have led to her wholehearted embrace of Islam, which finally allowed her to discover a comfortable American identity.

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In "Extension du domaine de la lutte," Thomas Faist discusses the effect of what he calls "securitization" of the discourse on migration on these transnational communities:

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Substantial and perceived threats caused by migration reach from immigrants posing threats to “our” jobs, incomes, housing or culture over nationalist movements which operate across the borders of sovereign states to those using terrorism as a method, such as militants operating in global networks. The links between international migration and security threats are inconclusive. ... In the end, the migration-security nexus is about values affected that are linked to ontological security, perceived existential threats.<sup>114</sup>

Like many immigrant groups before them, Muslims have become the scapegoats (or in Faist’s terms, “unspecific referent objects for fears”<sup>115</sup>) of choice for Americans looking for answers after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. One need look no further than (at the time) CNN’s popular conservative pundit Glenn Beck, who in 2006 invited the first American Muslim congressman onto his talk show in order to say, “Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.”<sup>116</sup> More than words, Faist’s securitization has led to tangible consequences for young Muslims since 9/11, such as specially targeted travel policies<sup>117</sup> and a spike in hate crimes.<sup>118</sup>

The narratives of transnational belonging that emerged in my fieldwork complicate the securitized view of immigrants and their children. Transnational ties mattered to these students. Muslim Students Association events, especially large celebrations like Eid al-Fitr, often showcased vibrant displays of multicultural food, entertainment, and clothing. Sometimes transnational ties rubbed up uncomfortably against mainstream American culture, as in the case

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Faist, “Extension du domaine de la lutte: International Migration and Security Before and After 11 September 2001,” in *The Migration Reader: Exploring Politics and Policy*, ed. Anthony Messina and Gallya Lahav (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 612.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Bill Carter and Brian Stelter, “Fox News Hires Glenn Beck Away From CNN,” *The New York Times* (New York, October 16, 2008), sec. Business, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/17/business/media/17fox.html>.

<sup>117</sup> John Tehranian, *Whitewashed*, 70.

<sup>118</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 1.

of Izdihar's local mosque and Hamza's feeling of cultural disconnect between home and public life. However these students were not merely foreign transplants on American soil; they defined themselves as much more than "Bangladeshis" or "Somalis" living in America. At one Islamic Society of Cannondale University *halaqa*, the chaplain asked the circle of students gathered around him where they were from. One Arab-looking student replied, "Boston." The chaplain pressed further, "No, I mean where are you *from*?" The student again replied, "I'm from Boston." Finally the chaplain asked, "Where are your *people* from?"<sup>119</sup> A student who felt more allegiance to his Arab identity would not have frustrated the chaplain's curiosity so much. Rather, most felt very American. And contrary to what "clash of civilizations" types believe, stories like Basma's and Hamza's show that Islam can play a positive role in reconciling transnational ties with American citizenship.

In *Muslim American Youth*, Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine undertake a multidisciplinary study of Muslim youth identity in the United States today. Their research subjects, like mine, were culled from primarily first and second-generation immigrants. They found, "strong empirical evidence that Muslim American youth indeed develop strong commitments to both their Muslim identities and their American identities."<sup>120</sup> I feel that my own fieldwork among Boston-area MSA members corroborates that finding. But while Sirin and Fine claim that, "two very different processes lead to an identification with the Muslim community and the mainstream U.S. society,"<sup>121</sup> I observed cases (such as Basma's) in which Muslim identity formed a conceptual bridge between transnational and American ways of belonging. In the end, this also supports Sirin and Fine in breaking down, "the dominant "incompatibility" hypothesis,

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<sup>119</sup> Field notes, October 26, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 149.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

which proposes that Muslim and “American” cultures are mutually exclusive.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Basma hypothesized that the creation of the ISBCC (Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center) would help integrate the Muslim community into wider American society by providing a focal point for community engagement and by organizing voter registration and other civic activities. She said, “The government can answer our needs if we take part.”<sup>123</sup>

Post-9/11 conditions have shaped the identities of Muslims in America. Sirin and Fine detail the rise of the term “Muslim-American.”<sup>124</sup> Rather than identifying as Arab-American, Pakistani-American, etc, many of my research subjects had indeed made their ethnic identities secondary to their religious identity. Their choice of the Muslim Students Association over ethnic or transnational student groups reflected a self-definition specific to the current historical context – guided by the securitized discourse swirling around them.<sup>125</sup> So students consolidated around an identity virtually forced upon them by outside circumstances; however, they never lost the power to make being Muslim meaningful to them. Lara Deeb writes that participants in the Lebanese Shi’a piety movement, which consolidated around the struggle against Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon, assert themselves against portrayals of Islamic militant groups such as the Taliban. “...Hajja Umm Zein exclaimed about the Taliban’s act of cultural destruction [of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan], ‘This backwardness is not true Islam!’ She self-consciously defended the integrity of her faith by making a distinction between Islam as she understood it, and the Taliban.”<sup>126</sup> The Muslim students in my research would be justified in rejecting Glenn Beck’s call for them to prove themselves innocent of atrocities committed by a

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Basma, interview.

<sup>124</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 4.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 230.

minority of Muslims whom they feel do not represent them. After all, as Sirin and Fine so eloquently state, “Although their nation was under attack, *they* were suddenly perceived as a potential threat to U.S. safety.”<sup>127</sup> Instead, like Congressman Ellison, Muslim Students Association members have chosen to engage with their fellow Americans through outreach activities.

Young American Muslims have coalesced around their religious identity increasingly as a result of the contemporary post-9/11 American context. As this chapter has shown, these students display a vibrant diversity in ethnicity and ideology. This diversity has in some ways contributed to a very American generation of young Muslims, despite American political culture’s desire to reify them into one indivisible, yet sub-American category. Likewise, an idealizing of Muslim unity, expressed in the concept of *umma*, exists within the Muslim community itself. This ideal makes some room within the MSA for students who do not fit the pious Sunni norm, but it does not eliminate all possible tensions among Muslim students with diverging concepts of their identities. The next chapter will examine one case of irresolvable tensions.

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<sup>127</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 1.

### **Chapter 3: Campus Culture Wars and the Limits of Identity Politics**

In order to get the “other side” of the MSA story, I made sure to interview somebody who had a markedly negative experience with the group. I spoke with Azam, a former MSA member of who had dropped out amid personal questioning and interpersonal tensions. An international student from Bangladesh, Azam shared with me his reasons for leaving MSA, his personal struggles with the Muslim portion of his identity, and his ideal vision for the Muslim Students Association. Along the way, he shared a particularly poignant tale of one Muslim student’s struggle against Islamophobic political forces. In the end, it seemed that Azam’s secular, identity-focused approach to the MSA conflicted irreconcilably with the piety that motivated his peers.

*Azam: Not Muslim?*

Azam identified himself as from Bangladesh, Bengali, a Bengali speaker, and a member of his extended family. When I asked where “Muslim” might fit into a description of himself to another person, he replied, “To be honest, I wouldn’t even put Muslim in there at all... it doesn’t really define who I am.” Fair enough, I thought, some people prefer not to identify themselves by their religion. Then I asked a question I viewed as essentially rhetorical: “Are you a Muslim?”

After a significant silence, Azam said, “No.” This was the first and only “no” answer I received for this question – and I was taken aback, knowing Azam’s history of MSA involvement, and the fact that he was born into a Muslim family in a predominantly Muslim country. “‘No’... Are you being facetious with me?” I asked. Matter-of-factly, he explained his reasoning, “Well, I mean, a perfectly honest answer would be, I don’t know enough to really judge that, and from what I know, there are a lot of things about Islam that I don’t personally agree with... and it makes me question whether... they would consider me a Muslim. See what I’m saying?” I nodded and said, “Yeah, but, I don’t know, who decides? You know what I mean?” Azam continued, “Yeah, in the end, it’s you who decides... I’m very interested in finding out like all those, the reasons behind those, you know, weird things in Islam. And the more I research, the more I go towards the side of not calling myself a Muslim.”<sup>128</sup>

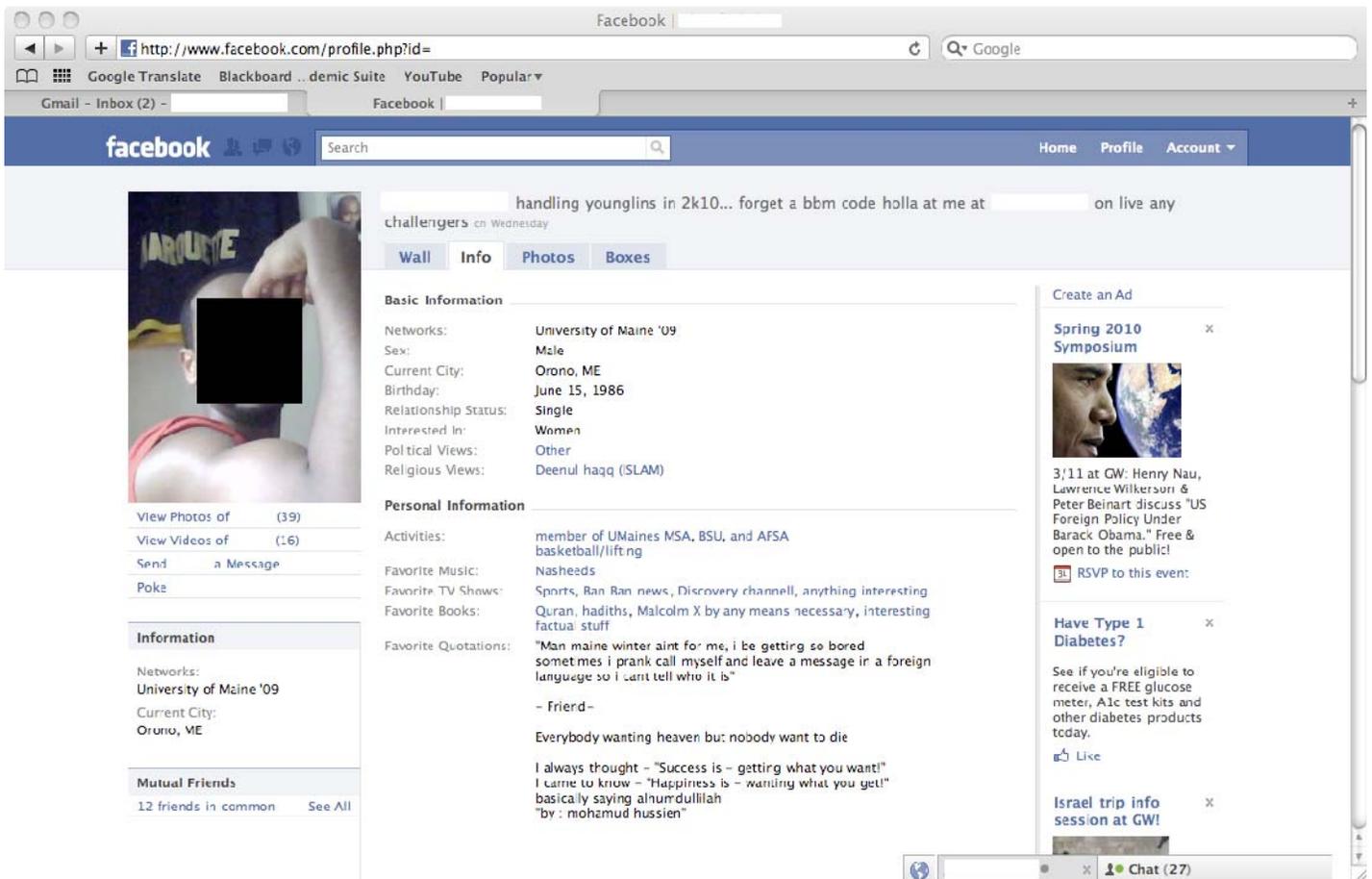
Just this initial portion of the interview gave me a lot to think about. I knew Azam was less “conservative” (read: observant, pious)<sup>129</sup> than many of his peers at MSA, but here he seemed to all but completely reject his Muslim identity. Echoing sentiments I have commonly heard among my Christian peers, he expressed deep reservations about considering himself Muslim because he disagreed with many “things” about the religion. In my experience among Muslims, however, there is a greater reluctance to renounce the religion. I have met a sizeable number of young Muslims who perform religious duties only seldom and self-consciously behave in ways counter to Islamic tenets, yet still assert their Muslim identity: for example, a Somali acquaintance who can put away a bottle of vodka before going to the club, but who also lists “ISLAM” as his religion on his Facebook profile page [see figure 1]. Furthermore, the

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<sup>128</sup> Azam, interview, November 3, 2009.

<sup>129</sup> “Conservative” was a term commonly used by my research subjects and other students to describe levels of religious observance.

consequences (spiritual and possibly material) of renouncing Islam are widely perceived as greater than those of simply failing to live up to its ideals. According to the Encyclopedia of Religion, “Quranic texts referring to apostasy threaten the apostate with punishment in the other world,” and many Islamic jurists have historically advocated a death penalty for the offense (although this ruling is not explicitly supported by the Qu’ran).<sup>130</sup>



<sup>130</sup> H.G. Kippenburg, “Apostasy,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, 15 vols., 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), p430-434, [http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/gps/infomark.do?contentSet=EBKS&bookId=002865997X&type=loi&tabID=T006&prodId=IPS&currentPosition=1&version=1.0&userGro](http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/gps/infomark.do?contentSet=EBKS&bookId=002865997X&type=loi&tabID=T006&prodId=IPS&currentPosition=1&version=1.0&userGroupName=medf54666&source=gale&infoPage=infoMarkPage) upName=medf54666&source=gale&infoPage=infoMarkPage.

## Figure 1

Given these factors, what would lead Azam to say that he was not Muslim (even if he did not wholly reject Islam as part of his identity and implied that he might change his mind some day)? What makes his experience so different from that of his peers? I believe that the largest factor differentiating Azam from his MSA peers was his style of “being” Muslim. For Azam, Islam functioned primarily as a symbol of his identity, to be deployed or defended like any other national or ethnic aspect. He joined the MSA not hoping to learn more Qu’ran, but rather “to be part of a community.”<sup>131</sup> He felt Muslim by birth, not by ideology or faith. “The Muslim identity was basically put there by my parents.”<sup>132</sup> The Muslim portion of his identity was much like his ethnicity – predetermined and permanent, yet negotiable.

### *Losing on the Identity Politics Battlefield*

In the second half of our interview, Azam described to me how he got involved in the Muslim Students Association. “It was freshman year... And freshman year you always look for causes to be a part of, to be a part of a community. I had a few friends in the Muslim House... But, I sort of got involved after the [campus conservative] magazine published that article.”<sup>133</sup> Azam responded to “that article,” which had reprinted and defended the infamous Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, with an op-ed in the campus daily newspaper explaining why Muslims took offense to the cartoons. This was a bold defense of the Muslim community mounted by a student less than two months into his undergraduate career – one that exposed him to criticism and public ridicule published in a self-professed “conservative” student magazine.

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<sup>131</sup> Azam, interview, November 3, 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Azam described this as a turning point (or, in his own words, a “What the fuck?” moment) that shattered the liberal image of his idyllic New England alma mater and its inhabitants. He decided to get more involved with MSA.

This is what got me thinking about the religion, and thinking that I should probably be involved in the group, so I can better speak for the group, for, you know, Muslims, people who come from a Muslim background like me, against these people.<sup>134</sup>

Azam forged on throughout the year, spearheading skits for Islam Awareness Week and taking charge of MSA publicity.

That spring, a satirical appropriation of his own Islam Awareness Week flyer [see figure 2] appeared – unsigned – in the aforementioned magazine. The satire transformed Azam’s MSA’s logo from a crescent and star into a sickle and throwing star, juxtaposed Qur’anic verses with headlines of Islamic extremism, and sarcastically concluded, “If you are a peaceful Muslim who can explain or justify this astonishingly intolerant and inhuman behavior, we’d really like to hear from you!” [See figure 3.] This piece deeply offended and frustrated the campus Muslim community, and it came on the heels of a previous satire by the same publication, targeting the black community. [See figure 4.] Azam helped the MSA join with several other student groups to present their grievances against the magazine, which culminated in a hearing by the student judiciary. The judiciary found the magazine guilty of “harassment and creating a hostile environment on campus,” and thus violating University policy. It recommended that the magazine be required to put a byline on all its published content and vaguely suggested that student government consider student groups’ “behavior” with regard to recognition and funding.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

The hearing began with high spirits and strong solidarity, but it ended in a flurry of bad press describing the upset students as anti-free speech. One newspaper wrote that the MSA's reaction was a "disturbing" sign of the erosion of free speech on campus. A simple Google search of this MSA's co-presidents' names still links them with the debacle.<sup>135</sup>

Many MSA members felt abandoned by the university administration after a dean overturned the judiciary's ruling the next fall. Furthermore, neoconservative icon Daniel Pipes was invited by the conservative magazine to speak as part of "Islamofascism Awareness Week" within weeks of the decision. A coalition of more than ten student groups, plus the university chaplaincies, cooperated to protest the event with signs labeled, "This is a hate-free campus." [See figure 5.] However, as one letter to the editor pointed out, this large show of solidarity was underreported even by the campus daily. It appeared that Azam's small, modestly funded MSA had walked into a public relations minefield, and that its members' concerns over the negative portrayal of Islam would be relentlessly steamrolled by larger political forces. It seemed that Muslim voices might only be heard when they could be appropriated to serve a predatory Islamophobic agenda.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

# ISLAMIC AWARENESS WEEK

## THE FACES OF ISLAM

MONDAY APRIL 2ND – SATURDAY APRIL 9TH

### **Islam and Pluralism**

*Monday, April 2nd, 7:00 PM*

*Library, Room 304*

The author of "The Koran for Dummies," Imam Sohaib Sultan has worked as an Islamic affairs analyst for BBC Radio in a series of dialogues on Muslim-Christian relations in the United States. The lecture will be geared towards answering the question of how we can promote interfaith dialogue.

### **Student Skits and Ummah Films**

*Tuesday, April 3rd, 8:00 PM*

*Hall, Room 231*

Come see student performed skits accompanied by professionally made informative shorts about Islam. Topics addressed include women's rights, knowledge of Islam, terrorism and its place in Islam, and being a Muslim on campus.

### **Living as a Muslim on Campus**

*Wednesday, April 4th, 5:00 PM*

*Lounge*

Members of the Muslim Student Union, a group of undergraduate and graduate Jumbos will speak about their experiences regarding being a Muslim student on campus grounds. There will be a question and answer session during which attendees are invited to ask questions they may have.

### **Islamic Cultural Night**

*Thursday, April 5th, 8:00 PM*

*Lounge*

There's more to life than faith. There's also culture and tradition in the forms of food, music, and art. A hands-on exploration of the culture of various Islamic countries will be offered, several pieces of Islamic art will be displayed, and a Henna booth will be hosted this night.

### **Lion of the Desert**

*Friday, April 6th, 6:00 PM*

*Lab, Room 104*

Inspirational movie about Imam Omar Mukhtar, a Muslim leader fighting against Mussolini followed by a voluntary discussion about the movie and questions unanswered by the movie.

### **In the City**

Join us while we volunteer at and visit mosques in the Boston area. Visit our website for more information.

For information and updates, visit <http://www.tufts.edu/ist/> or e-mail [ist@tufts.edu](mailto:ist@tufts.edu)

Islamic Awareness Week 2007 is cosponsored by the Chaplain's Office and MASA.

Figure 2



# ISLAM

## ARABIC TRANSLATION: SUBMISSION

In the spirit of Islamic Awareness Week, [REDACTED] presents an itinerary to supplement the educational experience.

"I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them." —The Koran, Sura 8:12

Author Salman Rushdie needed to go into hiding after Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini declared a fatwa calling for his death for writing *The Satanic Verses*, which was declared "blasphemous against Islam."

### MONDAY

Slavery was an integral part of Islamic culture. Since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, 14 million African slaves were sold to Muslims compared to 10 or 11 million sold to the entire Western Hemisphere. As recently as 1878, 25,000 slaves were sold annually in Mecca and Medina. (*National Review* 2002).

The seven nations in the world that punish homosexuality with death all have fundamentalist Muslim governments.

### TUESDAY

In Saudi Arabia, women make up 5% of the workforce, the smallest percentage of any nation worldwide. They are not allowed to operate a motor vehicle or go outside without proper covering of their body. (*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* 2001)

Most historians agree that Muhammed's second wife Aisha was 9 years old when their marriage was consummated.

### WEDNESDAY

"Not equal are those believers who sit and receive no hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of Allah with their goods and their persons. Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight with their goods and persons than to those who sit. Unto all Hath Allah promised good: But those who strive and fight Hath He distinguished above those who sit by a special reward." —The Koran, Sura 4:95

The Islamist guerrillas in Iraq are not only killing American soldiers fighting for freedom. They are also responsible for the vast majority of civilian casualties.

### THURSDAY

Ibn Al-Ghazzali, the famous Islamic theologian, said, "The most satisfying and final word on the matter is that marriage is a form of slavery. The woman is man's slave and her duty therefore is absolute obedience to the husband in all that he asks of her person."

Mohamed Hadfi, 31, tore out his 23-year-old wife Samira Bari's eyes in their apartment in the southern French city of Nimes in July 2003 following a heated argument about her refusal to have sex with him. (*Herald Sun*)

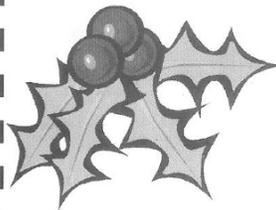
### FRIDAY

If you are a peaceful Muslim who can explain or justify this astonishingly intolerant and inhuman behavior, we'd really like to hear from you! Please send all letters to

[REDACTED]@gmail.com.

Figure 3

SPECIAL SECTION



## Blame it on Campus Conservatives

*Sung to the tune of "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth"*

Everybody stops  
And yells at me  
My politics  
Hurt their tender feelings  
Liberals don't like  
Our speakers or our magazine!  
But the one thing they've figured out  
Is the source of their problems!

Blame it on campus  
Conservatives,  
Conservatives,  
Those conservatives!

## O Come All Ye Black Folk

*Sung to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful"*

O Come All Ye Black Folk  
Boisterous yet desirable  
O come ye, O come ye to our University.  
Come and we will admit you,  
Born in to oppression;  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
Fifty-two black freshmen.

O Sing, gospel choirs,  
We will accept your children,  
No matter what your grades are, F's, D's or G's  
Give them privileged status; We will welcome all.  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
Fifty-two black freshmen.

All come! Blacks, we need you,  
Born into the ghetto.  
O Jesus! We need you now to fill our racial quotas.  
Descendants of Africa, with brown skin arriving:  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
O come, let us accept them,  
Fifty-two black freshmen.

Figure 4



Figure 5

*American Islam vs. American Free Speech?*

This same story has repeated itself time and time again at many college campuses across the US. An archetypical incident begins when a Muslim Students Association reacts to what it perceives as anti-Muslim bias. The MSA might petition to prevent an inflammatory speaker like Daniel Pipes from visiting their school. In fall of 2009, Princeton University Jewish student groups rescinded a speaking invitation to Nonie Darwish, a former Muslim who strongly criticizes Islam, after the Muslim Students Association and others raised their concerns.<sup>136</sup> Mainstream news articles, such as “At Princeton U., Islam antagonist "unduly silenced"” from *The Trentonian*,<sup>137</sup> focused on the implications for free speech. Conservative bloggers went further, implying that by considering their Muslim peers’ objections, the waffling Jewish groups had capitulated to Islamic extremism. Pamela Geller wrote for the *American Thinker*,

Look how the cancellation went down at Princeton. Look at the systematic bullying. This is the state of freedom of speech in the age of jihad... Cowards. Pathetic cowards. Haven't these Ivy-League know-nothings done their homework? Have they studied Islam? Jihad? ... For those of us who are chronicling the advancing Islamization of America, things have gotten decidedly worse since Obama took over. We have entered a dark age.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Hannah Martins, “Egyptian activist's invitation withdrawn,” *The Daily Princetonian* (Princeton University, November 19, 2009), sec. Politics, <http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2009/11/19/24497/>.

<sup>137</sup> Angela Wu, “At Princeton U., Islam antagonist "unduly silenced",” *The Trentonian* (Trenton, New Jersey, November 19, 2009), sec. News, <http://www.trentonian.com/articles/2009/11/19/news/doc4b04c4f8e36cb785729432.txt>.

<sup>138</sup> Pamela Geller, “Free Speech Silenced at Columbia and Princeton,” *American Thinker*, November 24, 2009, [http://www.americanthinker.com/2009/11/free\\_speech\\_silenced\\_at\\_columb.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2009/11/free_speech_silenced_at_columb.html).

Darwish herself wrote for World Net Daily:

I understand why Jewish groups disinvited me after Muslim pressure, since they are the ones who must live daily with Muslim groups who can make life unpleasant... By stifling free speech, shaming speakers of the truth and calling them names, we allow tyranny to win.<sup>139</sup>

In the same vein as Azam's experiences, the Princeton MSA found its attempted defense of the Muslim community's image transformed into a powerful political tool for its opponents. On the road to victory, these opponents often paint MSAs with a radical or "jihadist" brush. (See Jonathan Dowd-Gailey's "Islamism's Campus Club: The Muslim Students' Association."<sup>140</sup>) They close the circular argument by conflating active rejection of Islamophobic media and discourse, which often border or enter the realm of hate speech, with opposition of free speech. Thus they conclude that even if all Muslims are not jihadists, they are at the very least opposed to fundamental American values. After all, as Herman Schwartz notes, "Americans tend to see speech and its related right, association, as the primary right."<sup>141</sup> In an article about freedom of expression on Arab television, Naomi Sakr argues that narrow interpretations of the right to free expression can be used, "as a hegemonic strategy that serves relations of domination."<sup>142</sup> When

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<sup>139</sup> Nonie Darwish, "Free speech suppressed at Columbia, Princeton," News, *World Net Daily*, November 24, 2009, <http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=116982>.

<sup>140</sup> Jonathan Dowd-Gailey, "Islamism's Campus Club: The Muslim Students' Association," *The Middle East Quarterly* XI, no. 2 (March 30, 2004): 63+.

<sup>141</sup> Herman Schwartz, "Free Speech in Democracies: The Western Context," *WorldBank: Development Outreach* (1996), <http://devoutreach.com/TextOnlyFreeSpeechinDemocracies/tabid/802/Default.aspx>.

<sup>142</sup> Naomi Sakr, "Enriching or Impoverishing Discourse on Rights? Talk about Freedom of Expression on Arab Television," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 3 (2010): 101.

David Horowitz, Nonie Darwish, et al, call the MSA anti-free speech, they deploy a purposefully simplistic understanding of the term. Even in the United States, national security and anti-defamation laws limit free speech. Furthermore, private universities like Azam's are free to create and enforce their own policies limiting hate speech. Finally, in the examples I have documented, the responses to Islamophobic speech fell short of censorship. Public denunciation and even retraction of lecture invitations by student groups does not equal censorship, yet they seem close enough for Islamophobes to raise the specter of an attack upon a treasured American civil liberty.

As primarily religious communities, many MSAs lack the skills and resources needed to defend themselves when sucked into the perilous vortex of national and international politics. Without shrewd political foresight, they give in to immediate calls for protest, without anticipating their opponents' abilities or the long-term consequences of a knee-jerk reaction. Indeed, many MSAs purposefully avoid political activities, though members often remain active on the individual level. For instance, the Islamic Society of Schwinn University declined participation in the 2010 "Israeli-Apartheid Awareness Week." One correspondence: "I understand the hesitation to make this an MSA event... but if it could be widely co-sponsored (ASA, Christian students, PANGEA, etc) there are lots of us who would be interested in participating even if not under the MSA banner."<sup>143</sup> But when baited from outside to defend their collective Muslim identity, as in the case of Azam's group, many MSAs stumble into losing battles.

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<sup>143</sup> Personal correspondence, January 8, 2010.

### *The “Moderate Muslim” Drops Out*

Azam’s MSA involvement declined over the remainder of his sophomore year. He gave up his board position. The next year, he lived with a group of other MSA members. He participated sporadically in MSA activities, but interpersonal tensions and ideological disagreements festered in close quarters. He was elected to the board at the end of the year as Senior Advisor. He looked forward to perhaps guiding the MSA toward goals he thought were overlooked, but his term ended before it began over a dispute with the president during summer vacation.<sup>144</sup> It is unclear how deeply the frustrating events of his freshman and sophomore years affected his decision to withdraw for good, but I could be certain that the whole experience embittered him toward the MSA and probably contributed toward his giving up. It appeared that the Muslim Students Association was not, after all, the perfect community with which to express his identity on campus.

The more personal sections of Azam’s interview shed further light on why he differed from his peers in the predominantly American MSA. As the child of relatively wealthy parents in Bangladesh, Azam grew up in a milieu for which Islam was heavily diluted by local custom, and religious practice was casual. He described how Sufi Islam came to Bangladesh in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and mixed with Hindi culture, the result being an Islam far removed from that found in Arab lands. His father, ostensibly his strongest role model, regularly attended Friday prayer yet did not complete five prayers per day and told his son it was okay if he tried alcohol, as long as he didn’t “go overboard.” From ages seven to twelve, Azam took lessons from a tutor to read the Qu’ran. Though he finished reading it three times, he was never taught the meaning of the Arabic words:

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<sup>144</sup> Azam, interview, November 3, 2009.

Everyone does that, it's so weird. They'll just teach you to read the Qu'ran [in Arabic], but that's it. They don't teach you the meaning... There's the perception that if you just read the Qu'ran, you know, it's something sacred... So there is no even real pressure to understand... My parents didn't. It's sort of like, no one really questions, no one really thinks about it too much.<sup>145</sup>

Reacting to what he saw as blind religion, Azam viewed this kind of apathetic acceptance of Islam as pointless. Likewise, Charles Hirschkind describes the liberal worldview as looking down upon the piety movement's "overprivileging of the literal word."<sup>146</sup> He sees this disdain as linked to an idea that listening is "passive,"<sup>147</sup> a lower sense than sight. By this view, listening to or reciting the words of the Qu'ran without understanding the Arabic is a kind of "heeding"<sup>148</sup> or dangerous, unthinking religious adherence.

On the other hand, he seemed unwilling to subscribe to a more active form of religion. He described the Islamic belief system he had experienced as traditional, rigid, and stagnant. When I asked whether he thought Islam was "growing and changing or staying the same," he unequivocally replied that it was staying the same, and that was its "biggest problem." He complained that while Christianity has "lots of sects," in Islam "there is no dissent – it's considered a deviation, gets you called *kafir* [unbeliever], etc. This is offensive and dangerous. There is no critical thinking, no encouragement of creativity..." In his opinion, this critique held equal weight in terms of Bangladesh and the United States.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 65.

<sup>147</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 13.

<sup>148</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 13.

In a somewhat contradictory fashion, he also seemed to value the “liberal,” yet perhaps lackadaisical, Islam practiced in his home community as opposed to the “conservative” Islam he was surprised to find among his American peers at college. He saw the more pious young Muslims he met in the US as reactionary products of their minority status:

I feel like the Muslims here, they are a minority, they feel a need to coalesce around a certain set of ideals, a certain lifestyle, that’s what attracts them more toward a kind of conservative form of Islam whereas back home, everyone is a Muslim, so no one really cares enough to come up with a more conservative version and follow it. I mean there are a few, there are obviously pockets out there, but 99% of people are like, oh, we’re born Muslims...<sup>149</sup>

He went on to say that he wasn’t the only international student who felt that a less strict version of Islam was more “normal” for him:

Ok [another international student at Azam’s school] is a friend of mine, he’s from Pakistan. There’s this joke he says to us. He has a little brother, and once it happened that his brother didn’t shave for a long time, because he was just lazy... His grandfather asked him, “Why aren’t you shaving?” And his little brother replied, “Oh, I’m not shaving because the Prophet told us to keep a beard and it’s Sunna [following the example of the Prophet Muhammad].” Of course he was joking, and then his grandfather was like, “Oh, the Prophet rode a camel to work, why don’t you ride a camel to school?” And that little story, it’s lovely because it shows what people actually think!<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

“What people actually think” – in Bangladesh, perhaps, but not as likely in Boston. Azam compared the pious American Muslim students in his MSA to the most “conservative” Muslim elements back home in Bangladesh, an understandable, but perhaps unfair comparison. These two groups emerged out of much different historical and social circumstances. For evidence of contrast one must look only to the fact that the Boston “conservatives” thrive in a predominantly non-Muslim society versus the Bangladeshi “conservatives,” whose home culture is majority Muslim.

*A Community Defined by Piety, Not Identity*

I asked Azam how he thought the MSA could improve. For him, an ideal MSA would serve as a network for “people from a Muslim background.” He explained how his time in the MSA had helped make valuable career contacts. Out of several graduate students he met through MSA, one in particular helped him get into an advanced undergraduate research program that led to two papers published in his name. Azam felt strongly that the MSA should make room for “every Muslim.” In order to accomplish this, he felt that the group needed to focus less on piety.

Moderate Muslims are freaked out by religious Muslims. ...from what I've seen, my own experience in Bangladesh, and here in the United States... They're ... freaked out by all the religiousness, they don't like ultrareligiousness. Or at least the appearance of ultrareligiousness.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

In his opinion, less pious Muslims avoided the MSA because it was dominated by “conservatives,” with whom they felt uncomfortable.

[A fellow MSA member] used to ask me all the time, “Why don’t people tell me stuff, why don’t they tell me about these things they tell you?” ... I’m like, you know, because I don’t judge people, I don’t have a strong religious position, and that’s why people are more comfortable with talking to me.<sup>152</sup>

His advice was to “tone it down” in order to attract the “moderate Muslims,” whom he claimed were the majority on campus. Otherwise, the MSA constituted an “enclave of religiousness on a very secular campus.” And in his opinion, University funding obligated the MSA to “integrate” and somehow represent all the Muslims on campus. Playing the devil’s advocate, I asked why he didn’t start a “Secular Muslim Students Association”.

Azam had other options in terms of student organizations. He could have joined the South Asian student group, or the international student association. He could have started his own group just for Bengali students, or even one for South Asian Muslims. However, it made sense for him, especially after being plunged into the American Muslim experience of political siege, to join his peers coalescing around their religious identity. Despite the wide array of cultural, religious, and political organizations available to university students, a rigorous academic schedule plus a plethora of work, arts, sports, and social activities typically leave time for focusing on only one identity-based association. The Muslim Students Association’s urge toward unity of all Muslims removed any impediments to Azam’s initial participation, but this

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

urge was ultimately not strong enough to overcome tensions between his essentially secular Muslim identity and the normative piety that motivated the core MSA members.

The fact is, Azam did not represent the average MSA member. As an international student and as a more secular than pious Muslim, he instead represented a minority. If, as I suggest, the MSA could be considered a sort of “piety movement,” such as those described by Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb, Azam truly existed on the fringe. True, other non-practicing Muslims existed and actively participated in the MSAs in my study, but they were greatly outnumbered. They ultimately held little control over the overall direction of the group. Some, like Azam, grew frustrated and drifted away from the group. Others contented themselves with selective participation, or poured their energy into board positions geared toward social or cultural activities. When Azam says he is a “moderate Muslim,” he uses a term often thrown around in the US public arena, one deeply resented by many Muslims who fear, as Azam confirms, that they will only become “moderate Muslims,” and thus not security threats in the eyes of the public and the government, when they stop practicing their religion. Azam’s story could be read as demonstrating the MSA’s failure to represent “all Muslims” on campus. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will focus on its deeper implications: it proves that MSA is a community defined more by piety than by identity politics.

As this chapter highlights, they often fall flat on the political battlefield. MSAs’ institutional weakness in defending Muslim identity indicates that this is not a main focus of the organization. The MSAs I encountered generally avoided putting their name on any kind of political activism, and Azam’s MSA entered the campus culture wars only after being provoked – the conflict was brought to them. This conflict forced them into a role – the representative of all Muslims – and a mobilizing framework – identity politics – that they were not prepared to

take on. MSAs focus much more attention on activities rooted in piety rather than identity politics. Indeed, their core membership has coalesced around a normative piety that tolerates other students' views and practices, but only accommodates them up to a certain limit. In the following chapters, I will clarify why I consider more than prayer services and religious celebrations to be rooted in piety. Using the concept of “da’wa” as a framework, I will explain how piety also informs interfaith and outreach activities.

## Chapter 4: Outreach, Da'wa, and Piety

In this chapter, I will describe the outreach activities undertaken by Muslim Students Associations and their place within the university public and the lives of individual Muslim students. I organize types of outreach according to what I call the “triad of outreach”: interfaith activity, *da'wa* to Muslims, and *da'wa* to non-Muslims. Mainly through anecdotes from my time spent at various MSA events, I will show how these three types of outreach overlap and interact with each other, and how piety undergirds the outreach process.

### *Toward Engagement*

While Islamophobia clearly poses a dilemma for American Muslims, the future looks promising. Indeed, most of my informants felt optimistic toward the Muslim community's future in terms of decreasing ignorance and increasing tolerance on the part of non-Muslims. Michael Barkun's hypothesis (see Introduction) suggests that Islam will eventually fall out of vogue as America's Most Wanted Religion.<sup>153</sup> But what can the Muslim community do while history takes its course? Regarding American relations with Muslim-majority countries, Juan Cole recommends a hearty regimen of “engagement.”<sup>154</sup> Likewise, Barkun enjoins “community-mindedness” and a “non-adversarial approach” to Muslim community-government relations, and he specifically instructs that other faith communities should get involved in the issue of investigations of houses of worship.<sup>155</sup> “Faiths deemed to be “dangerous” feel that they must expose themselves to scrutiny to prove that what they do is socially harmless.”<sup>156</sup> Proactively engaging with the wider public could shift some of the power to control the discourse about

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<sup>153</sup> Barkun, “Religion and Secrecy,” 294.

<sup>154</sup> Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World*, 5.

<sup>155</sup> Barkun, “Religion and Secrecy,” 296.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

Islam back into Muslims' hands. As Geneive Abdo demonstrates in the last chapter of *Mecca and Main Street*, and as I have found in my fieldwork, many Muslim Students Association members have shouldered the burden of being ambassadors of their faith. Abdo writes, "Since September 11, Muslim student leaders have found themselves in great demand; they are often called upon to explain the basics of Islam to campus audiences of hundreds of students."<sup>157</sup>

An article by Barbara Sahli, Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi, and Mona Abo-Zena in *Educating the Muslims of America* provides a fascinating analysis of how community engagement between Muslims and non-Muslims can effectively counter the negative misperceptions and unsubstantiated fears generated by Islamophobia. "Authentic Interactions: Eliminating the Anonymity of Otherness" describes the results of a yearly program by the Islamic Academy of New England (IANE), "a full-time Islamic school," to invite students from neighboring grade schools to learn about Islam and spend time with their Muslim peers.<sup>158</sup> Based on comments collected from the participating students, the authors felt that this program succeeded in increasing the non-Muslim students' academic understanding of Islam in an extremely effective way.

Even with the extensive classroom coverage of the subject [Islam] prior to the visit, the students in this study overwhelmingly report an increase in their understanding as a result of firsthand experience, echoing Allport's theory that accurate information alone is not enough to change attitudes.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street*, 191.

<sup>158</sup> Barbara Sahli, Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi, and Mona Abo-Zena, "Authentic Interactions: Eliminating the Anonymity of Otherness," in *Educating the Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Haddad, Farid Senzai, and Jane I. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233-234.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

The interaction between the students (such as eating and playing together) allowed them to humanize each other;<sup>160</sup> it also led to a great number of Muslim students reporting that they felt more comfortable discussing Islam with others after the experience.<sup>161</sup> The authors conclude: “If education is the key to combating Islamophobia and improving perceptions of Islam, then it is essential that Muslims and their institutions participate in those educational efforts to narrow the chasm between Muslims and non-Muslims.”

In a happy coincidence, I actually encountered at least one Muslim Students Association member who had attended IANE and participated in the program described by Safia, et al. Hamza, then president of the Islamic Society of Cannondale University, related, “When I was in Islamic school, they used to invite students from other private schools for lunch and to watch a prayer and a lecture, then we’d play basketball or whatever.”<sup>162</sup> Hamza shared that he became involved with community outreach even before entering college. He related that leaving IANE’s all-enveloping Islamic community and entering public high school was a shock; to deal with it, he would organize talks about Islam for his peers, using sweets as bait. His local mosque made an effort to invite non-Muslims to the mosque and to cultural fairs, etc, in response to incidents such as the Oklahoma City bombings, September 11, and the Danish cartoon scandal. They tried to get local media to cover their outreach events. Hamza himself invited his high school English teacher to the mosque, saying it was a good experience. Hamza’s pre-college involvement, beginning in primary school, arguably contributed to his confident involvement at Cannondale,

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>162</sup> Hamza, interview, November 4, 2009.

where he pioneered a very successful “dinner and a *halaqa*” model and oversaw his MSA’s involvement in regular interfaith activities.<sup>163</sup>

Hamza’s MSA board even included an “Outreach Coordinator” position, which one of his peers from back home filled. This student, Muhammad, had participated in Interfaith Action, Inc.’s “Teenage Interfaith Diversity Education” (TIDE) conference during high school. He said, “Coming through [the TIDE program] gave me a different perspective.”<sup>164</sup> He said that along with his TIDE experience, his father and a friend’s father influenced him to get involved through their own interfaith work. They rallied community support when their local imam was going through an immigration trial, and when opposition threatened to shut down the brand new Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) before construction was even completed. “The interfaith community helped, people brought in legal counsel... When churches and synagogues come out to support, it really looks good.”<sup>165</sup> In Muhammad’s impression, the Cannondale MSA had not done much interfaith activity before he brought his experience to the table as the first ever Outreach Coordinator. He began by building bilateral bridges between the Islamic Society and other campus faith groups – starting with Hillel (a Jewish student organization with many chapter nationwide) – and attending these groups’ events as much as possible. I will discuss some of the fruits of Muhammad’s labor later. To bring things full circle, Muhammad planned to help host the upcoming TIDE conference.<sup>166</sup>

These two young men’s trajectory before college undoubtedly strengthened their capacity to take charge of outreach work as part of the Cannondale MSA. They built comfort working with their non-Muslim peers and learned the skills necessary to coordinate various community

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Muhammad, interview, February 2, 2010.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

groups for specific events. Safia, Tobias-Nahi, and Abu-Zena's study strongly affirms the efficacy and importance of conscious engagement with the wider community on the part of Muslims; it also indicates that giving young Muslims the opportunity to participate in this type of activity builds their confidence to continue doing so later. Hamza and Muhammad exemplify this hypothesis. After coming this far, however, I suggest we anticipate the long-term results of undergraduate interfaith and outreach work. Surely Safia, et al's hypothesis extends beyond the scope of primary school education, to promise even greater strides in community engagement by Muslims who cut their teeth on campus interfaith activity.

In this final chapter, I will describe the various forms of engagement in which MSAs participate. Primarily using anecdotes from my participant-observation, I will demonstrate how various forms of outreach intertwine and interact. Outreach is not merely a one-way process of educating non-Muslims about Islam in order to decrease Islamophobia. It springs from the piety that holds together Muslim Students Associations, and it does work on that piety. It impacts many audiences, including the MSA members themselves. I will begin by describing two typical forms of community engagement, and work toward a more complex analysis based on my concept of the "Triad of Outreach."

### *Volunteerism*

Schwinn MSA members regularly participated in a monthly food drive organized by the Islamic Multi-Service Organization in Roxbury, Massachusetts. One Saturday morning each month, the students traveled to Roxbury to help pack and deliver boxes of food to poor families and individuals in the Boston area. Many of the recipients were Muslim immigrants who refuse to come out of their apartments until they hear "Salaam aleykum," the traditional Muslim greeting. Regular participation in this food drive helps maintain links with the community, and

fosters camaraderie as students get lost trying to navigate the streets of greater Boston together. Several Tufts MSA members, myself included, participated in Islamic Relief's 2009 "Day of Dignity." This event occurs in many urban centers across the country. At Boston's location, one or two hundred volunteers, mostly MSA members like us, gathered at the Roxbury Community Center to distribute free clothing, food, and hygiene kits and provide simple medical and dental screenings. In addition to organized community service, many MSA members undertake spontaneous volunteerism – this is fueled by personal contacts and a lively exchange of information on community needs in MSA e-mail lists.

Community service provides Muslim students with an avenue to fulfill a religious obligation, but also to assert a positive identity in the larger community of which they are a part. Videos on the "Day of Dignity" website depict Muslim volunteers expressing hopes that their good works will reflect well on Islam as a whole.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, the smiling faces of eager young Muslims have inevitably touched the hearts of many of their immediate beneficiaries. Few of these activities are well publicized, and the many small acts of kindness prompted by e-mail by and large go completely unacknowledged by either the university or the local community. Nevertheless, volunteerism works on the three levels identified by Lara Deeb in relation to her research subjects' pious public works:

For devout Shi'i women, public participation is a necessary part of how a person is pious and moral on three levels. First, before God – where it is an element in the fulfillment of one's piety and will contribute *'ajr* [literally wages] to one's afterlife account. Second,

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<sup>167</sup> Islamic Relief USA, *Day of Dignity 2009*, <http://www.dayofdignity.com/>.

before others – where it provides a visible display of one’s morality. And finally, before oneself – where it nourishes the continued development of one’s own faith.<sup>168</sup>

Later on in this chapter, I will further explain how outreach activities work on the level of piety.

### *Islam Awareness Week*

“Islam Awareness Week” is probably the quintessential manifestation of MSA outreach to the non-Muslim. Conceived in the 1990s, this week of events can be observed yearly at numerous college campuses, and has become one of the most central activities for many MSAs.<sup>169</sup> MSAs often choose an overall theme within which each lecture or panel, cultural activity, community service event, and social gathering, etc., falls. MSAs invite the broader university community, and often the surrounding community as a whole, to attend IAW events. Complex to plan and execute, Islam Awareness Week rallies the participation of virtually every active member. This outreach and engagement effort dominates the MSA calendar, and it is one of the main events during which Muslim students are visible on campus.

As well as being targeted specifically to a non-Muslim audience, planning for Islam Awareness Week often requires active cooperation between MSAs and their non-Muslim peers. The MSA National “Islam Awareness Week Resource Center” website recommends soliciting co-sponsorships from other student groups to boost publicity and funding.<sup>170</sup> My own involvement in the Muslim Students Association began with Islam Awareness Week at Tufts in spring of 2007; I and two other non-Muslim students joined in to help execute a Culture Show and put on comedic skits. It was easy for us, as non-Muslims, to participate in a more culturally-

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<sup>168</sup> Lara Deeb, *The Pious Modern*, 217.

<sup>169</sup> MSA National, *Islam Awareness Week Resource Center*, <http://iaw.msanational.org/>.

<sup>170</sup> MSA National, *Islam Awareness Week Resource Center*, <http://iaw.msanational.org/>.

and socially-oriented MSA activity. Our participation filled out an otherwise meager pool of volunteers and also demonstrated that the MSA was an open, friendly organization.

In general, Islam Awareness Week aims to educate non-Muslims about Islam, but its actual result encompasses much more. First, this large exercise in event planning brings Muslim students – typically including some who participate in little else – together, creating group cohesion. Muslim students also represented a large portion of the attendees, and they too learned more about Islam during the course of the week. As my experience shows, non-Muslims not only act as audience members during Islam Awareness Week, but also as partners and boots on the ground in some cases. Furthermore, the educational aspect of the week could reach beyond mere intellectual enlightenment. During the course of fieldwork I was told that a particular non-Muslim student who seemed on the path to becoming Muslim was inspired after attending an Islam Awareness Week panel on converts to the religion.

### *The Triad of Outreach*

Activities whose target audience is the non-Muslim community have become increasingly central to MSA agendas. Along with Islam Awareness Week, most MSAs now participate in "interfaith" events; usually dialogues or social events intended to bring various campus faith groups together. As mentioned, one MSA in this study had a dedicated "Outreach Coordinator" board position;<sup>171</sup> another added just such a position in anticipation of the following school year. Volunteer work was another avenue for reaching out to the non-Muslim community. On the surface, these efforts represented a conscious effort to shed a positive light on the Muslim community and gain allies.

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<sup>171</sup> Muhammad, interview, February 1, 2010.

During my time observing and interviewing at various MSAs, I began to think of outreach in terms of a triad. This triad includes three general approaches to outreach: interfaith activities, intra-community outreach, and *da'wa* to non-Muslims. These three approaches figure into various MSA activities in a variety of forms: implicit, explicit, conscious or unconscious. As the Islam Awareness Week example demonstrates, there is considerable overlap as single events serve multiple purposes, the lines between education and proselytizing blur, and unexpected audiences emerge in the fluid campus environment. Muslims do use outreach activities as a means to negotiate their identities (e.g. presenting "myths and facts about Islam" in order to combat negative stereotypes about Muslims) but also as acts of faith in and of themselves. The faith/piety aspect of outreach I understand under the rubric of "da'wa".

*Da'wa* is an Arabic term meaning "call to Islam." While this term might be analogized roughly to "proselytizing," *da'wa* differs considerably from the Christian model of evangelism most identifiable in the United States.<sup>172</sup> One would virtually never find a Muslim standing on a street corner, handing out pamphlets about the Prophet Muhammad, or going on mission to spread Islam in the third world. Rather, the concept of *da'wa* places a premium on encouragement through example. At an executive board meeting of one particular MSA, I witnessed the president respond to the appearance of a fellow board member in an inappropriate place (perhaps a bar or frat party) by reminding everyone that they were "ambassadors." Not only was God paying attention, but also each member's actions reflected to the community directly on the MSA and in turn upon Islam.<sup>173</sup> One might find it strange to encounter a student group president who is concerned about the off-duty activities of his fellow members, but to an MSA president, maintaining a clean image is part and parcel of *da'wa*. If non-Muslims or non-

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<sup>172</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam*, 89.

<sup>173</sup> Hamza, interview, November 4, 2009.

practicing Muslims saw their peers' behavior as consistent and virtuous, they might feel called to Islam.

In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood defines *da'wa* within the context of the 20th century Islamic Revival. For the women of the Egyptian mosque movement, *da'wa* was "a religious duty that requires all adult members of the Islamic community to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety," through both "verbal admonishment" and "practical activities," such as education, volunteerism, and personal discussions.<sup>174</sup> She writes that the current understanding of *da'wa* emerged quite recently;<sup>175</sup> Rashid Rida (d. 1935), a founding father of the modern Islamic revival, first classified *da'wa* as incumbent upon each Muslim.<sup>176</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood implemented this understanding in its activities and, importantly, stressed the importance of *da'wa* directed not outside, but inside the existing Muslim community.<sup>177</sup> Both Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind describe the proliferation of Egyptian *da'wa* activity as aided by a newly widespread "familiarity with bases and styles of Islamic argumentation," previously restricted to scholarly elites, but now available to all beneficiaries of the Information Age.<sup>178</sup><sup>179</sup> Though specific to a particular time and place, I found that these descriptions of *da'wa* fit well with what I observed and discussed during research. After all, many of the MSA's first members brought with them the ideas of Islamic revivalist thinkers like Rashid Rida, such that, "Islam was seen as an ideology, a way of life, and a mission, and the organization [MSA] was not considered simply as a way to serve the community but as a means to create an ideal community and serve

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<sup>174</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 57-58.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>179</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 108.

Islam."<sup>180</sup>

I did not encounter the term *da'wa* as such very often during the course of fieldwork. In fact, only a few of the students I worked with clearly articulated the desire to encourage non-Muslims to accept Islam. Of course, Arabic terminology is less useful in Boston than in Cairo. While it is likely that my research subjects purposely simplified their use of religious terminology for me, I believe this also reflects a key difference between the *da'wa* undertaken by American Muslim students and the *da'wa* of the Egyptian piety movement. Muslim Students Associations operate in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Therefore the rules of *da'wa* differ: the opportunity for *da'wa* to non-Muslims is greater, and *da'wa* becomes closely enmeshed with the task of raising awareness about Islam in the more political sense. As one of Sirin and Fine's teenage interviewees expressed, "I find it just a responsibility of life. It's part of being a Muslim, you have to make 'dawah' you have to teach people."<sup>181</sup> *Da'wa* is likened to "teaching" rather than "proselytizing". One has to dig through ambiguous verbal expressions to find evidence of *da'wa* among American college students. However once this evidence is found it is clear how much it undergirds MSA activities.

### *MSA Counterpublics*

According to Charles Hirschkind in his book *The Ethical Soundscape*, cassette tapes of sermons listened to and discussed by pious Egyptians in their homes and taxicabs created an "Islamic counterpublic."<sup>182</sup> Within this counterpublic, the norms of public interaction change, and a discourse emerges which is specific to that counterpublic. I found that accordingly, each MSA creates its own "counterpublic sphere" within which the rules of public engagement differ

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<sup>180</sup> Gutbi Madhi Ahmed, "Muslim Organizations," 14.

<sup>181</sup> Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 31.

<sup>182</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 106.

from those of the wider university community. In the above example, an MSA president transgressed the typical boundaries observed among college students when he directly addressed his peers' moral behavior. Lara Deeb describes a parallel dynamic occurring within Lebanese Shia women's service organizations, where members experience subtle pressure to start wearing *hijab* [cover their head]:

This final phase indicates the extent to which not only individual women, but also *jam'iyyas* [service organizations] themselves are subject to judgment within the normative moral order of public piety. The reputation of the *jam'iyya* was partly dependent on the reputations of its members, resulting in pressure on its volunteers to discipline themselves within the bounds of morally acceptable behavior.<sup>183</sup>

Hirschkind likewise describes one aspect of the Egyptian Islamic counterpublic as “politicization of private choices [as defined by the liberal paradigm].”<sup>184</sup> Using this example, it is easy to see how an underlying commitment to *da'wa* shapes the MSA “counterpublic.”

I would also argue that the MSA counterpublic exists within a broader counterpublic bounded by the university. With its different norms and modes of discourse, the university itself may be considered a “counterpublic sphere” in relation to American society as a whole. As a part of the university community, the MSA therefore cannot escape certain aspects of the discourse found there. For example, some universities explicitly publish guidelines governing religious activity on campus. On its official chaplaincy website, Harvard University issues a statement titled “About Destructive Religious Groups,” presenting the warning signs of such groups, and

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<sup>183</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 206.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

concluding, “All Harvard Chaplains are committed to mutual respect and non-proselytization; we oppose religious harassment and manipulation, and we affirm the roles of personal freedom, doubt and open critical reflection in healthy spiritual growth.”<sup>185</sup> Clearly, these guidelines are loose and subject to the discretion of university officials. Nevertheless, the fact that universities are private institutions fully entitled to establish their own limits on campus religious activity has led, in my experience, to conscious deliberation on the part of MSAs as to the limits of acceptable *da’wa* activity. Within the confines of delineated “Muslim spaces,” such as *musallahs* and Schwinn’s Muslim culture house, however, Muslim students felt comfortable making more explicit *da’wa*, especially to each other.

The Muslim culture house in particular acted as a site where the MSA counterpublic was grounded. Lara Deeb describes the Shia enclave of Al-Dahiyya the same way, though she uses terms other than Hirschkind’s “counterpublic.” According to Deeb, the sights, sounds, and yearly cycles of Al-Dahiyya made it a place defined by Islamic piety within which such piety could flourish.<sup>186</sup> The house in which some of Schwinn’s MSA members resided certainly worked the same way. The living room was partitioned into two halves, one filled with a carpet for communal prayer. Islamic art pieces and a bookcase of Qur’ans and religious books further highlighted this room’s pious nature. The sound of the call to prayer emanated regularly from various residents’ computers, programmed to the city’s exact location. Accordingly, students would descend from their rooms (or even come in from outside) at the appropriate times to pray together. A copy of the “house rules” displayed in the hall reminded one that this was a residence defined by pious conduct: no pork or intoxicating substances were allowed inside the house,

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<sup>185</sup> The President and Fellow of Harvard College, “Harvard Chaplains: About Us,” *Harvard Chaplains*, [http://www.chaplains.harvard.edu/about\\_us.php](http://www.chaplains.harvard.edu/about_us.php).

<sup>186</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 66.

residents and visitors were expected to treat each other in a respectful manner, and mixed-gender interactions were limited to non-intimate contact with doors left open [see appendix 1]. Though people sometimes bent the dress code or used foul language, the rules could always be referred to and certain boundaries were never transgressed.

Deeb labeled one aspect of Al-Dahiyya's pious Shia community "discursive piety." Residents used Islamic terms and Qur'anic references in daily speech, and debated correct religious practice.<sup>187</sup> This is part of negotiating "authenticated" Islam, an effort to attain a "modern," "correct" pious way of life.<sup>188</sup>

Such conversations reinscribed the importance of correct knowledge, demonstrated the piety of the speakers, provided an informal space where questions could be asked and points clarified, and conveyed crucial information to younger people or those who have recently become committed.<sup>189</sup>

Similarly, residents of the Muslim culture house greeted guests at the door with "Salaam aleykum" and used phrases like "insha'allah" [hopefully; lit. God willing] and "hamdulillah" [thank God; lit. praise be to God] in everyday conversations. Even outside the context of *halaqas* or other MSA-related activities, these students often casually discussed Islamic doctrine while cooking dinner or doing homework. What does the story of Lot really say? One person might grab a Qu'ran from the shelf, while another would Google commentary of famous Islamic scholars.

Like most aspects of MSA life, the Muslim house could not remain a hermetically sealed

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<sup>187</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 118.

<sup>188</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 102.

<sup>189</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 124.

sanctum without any relationship to the broader university community. The MSA counterpublic and its accompanying “discursive piety” bled out from its home base into the surrounding campus community. For example, a group of Muslim students meets at the cafeteria for halal meat on Wednesday, greeting each other “Salaam aleykum” in public. They sit down to eat with a mixed group of MSA members, other Muslim students, and non-Muslims. The house residents invite the other students to join in a potluck dinner party at the Muslim culture house later that week. Non-Muslims and non-pious Muslim students enter the religiously defined residence, both becoming immersed in its particular discourse and bringing their own norms with them. At the very least, they will learn to take their shoes off before sitting on the prayer carpet to play Pictionary. More likely than not, they will also find themselves in a conversation about Islamic tenets and practices. The Muslim house thus becomes a potential site of all three corners of the triad of outreach: interfaith activity, *da’wa* to non-Muslims, and *da’wa* within the Muslim community.

### *Interfaith adventures*

An excellent example of an interfaith activity participated in by the Muslim Students Association was encountered at Cannondale University. The Islamic Society joined with the campus Hillel and a multi-faith student group to hold an event entitled, “Myths and Facts about Islam and Judaism.” (Schwinn University also regularly cosponsored events with Hillel. Implicitly, it seemed that both sides wished to prove their ability to rise above the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, these events were never billed as opportunities to discuss the conflict, and participants were sometimes explicitly requested not to bring the subject up.) This panel featured the Muslim chaplain, Rabbi Seth Braunstein of the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, the president of the Islamic Society, and the student vice president of religious education

at Hillel. Upon arriving at the event, attendees shared a free halal/kosher dinner of falafel and salad and mingled together in the university's multifaith center.

The panel itself occurred in a large multi-purpose room. The panelists and a student moderator sat on chairs along one side of the room, while the large audience (about 15 of whom I recognized as members of the campus MSA) sat together on carpets and cushions on the floor. Each panelist introduced him or herself. Rabbi Braunstein shared that what he loved most about Judaism was its multivocality, quoting the ancient Rabbi Hillel: "These and those are the words of the living God."<sup>190</sup> The Muslim chaplain gave a colorful speech in which he called himself an "honorary Jew" because of his Jewish first name. He described the humbling, humanizing experience of hajj and stressed Islam's universal concept of brotherhood. The moderator then laid down a few ground rules: no politics, no proselytizing, be tolerant and supportive of fellow students.

This opened the floor to questions from the audience. Students from various religious backgrounds asked questions mostly of the imam and the rabbi, but also of the student panelists regarding their personal practices and experiences of maintaining their faith and religious identity on campus. The rabbi and imam showed very different understandings of their faiths; the rabbi clearly hailed from a liberal tradition ("For me, Torah is divinely inspired but not the word of God."<sup>191</sup>) while the imam claimed he could find the answer to virtually any life question in the Qu'ran. This led to some interesting, but civil, debates on certain issues, such as corporal punishment. When time ran out, the panelists remained for further questions, and the imam gave out pins that said "Peace" in English, Arabic, and Hebrew. The panel exemplified what observers might consider a successful interfaith activity. The event was well attended and ran smoothly;

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<sup>190</sup> Field notes, November 9, 2009.

<sup>191</sup> Field notes, November 9, 2009.

each attendee was encouraged to socialize with students of other faiths and ask any question they had, no matter how uncomfortable (as long as it was not political!) The program made both religious experts/authorities and peers available for dialogue, thereby putting a human face to each faith. Cooperation between Hillel, the campus MSA, and the multi-faith group pooled resources and probably resulted in higher attendance than could have been achieved had any of the groups undertaken the project unilaterally.

On the other hand, I detected a strong current of *da'wa* underlying the Muslim chaplain's remarks and responses. When describing his *hajj* experience, he said, "I pray that all of you will get to visit Mecca."<sup>192</sup> Clearly none of the non-Muslim students attending would get that opportunity unless they converted to Islam. Rather than following Rabbi Braunstein in his virtually value-free statements, the chaplain non-combatively, but unapologetically advocated for Islam as the best religion. When one student asked both the imam what their religions said about atheism, the Muslim chaplain replied, "What would your father say if you told him he wasn't your father? Atheism is *kufr*, denying the gift... No paradise for you!"<sup>193</sup> On the other hand, Braunstein said, "None of us has a monopoly on truth or goodness – that's like idolatry, thinking that you have the whole divine truth... I find myself in atheistic moments."<sup>194</sup> These exchanges reflected rather divergent ideas of what an interfaith event strove for. While Rabbi Braunstein strove to portray Judaism as a harmless equal to all belief systems, the Muslim chaplain highlighted the universal in Islam without the least attempt to downplay his belief in its superiority.

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<sup>192</sup> Field notes, November 9, 2009.

<sup>193</sup> Field notes, November 9, 2009.

<sup>194</sup> Field notes, November 9, 2009.

*Sharing the faith: Da'wa to non-Muslims*

As a non-Muslim spending time with Muslims, I sometimes experienced *da'wa* directed toward myself. The most memorable instance occurred during a *halaqa*, or religious study circle at Cannondale. The Muslim chaplain, an African-American convert who brought a lively Baptist flavor to his presentation, talked about the oneness of God. Knowing that I was not Muslim, he made a special effort to involve me in the *halaqa* by teaching me the *shahada*<sup>195</sup>, the phrase uttered three times to convert to Islam. "And someday we hope you'll break in with an 'Ashhadu...'" declared the chaplain, expressing his confidence that I would eventually say the *shahada* officially and thus convert.<sup>196</sup>

This was the most aggressive *da'wa* I had ever experienced; yet it consisted mainly of a jovial teaching moment, without the more emotionally charged, often shaming or fear-inducing affect I have observed in Christian evangelists. (In fact, I was asked afterward by one or two students whether this situation had made me feel uncomfortable, signaling that the chaplain's style was considered especially outgoing.) On most occasions though, *da'wa* played into countless less overt interactions as well. I cannot help but classify my first encounter with a Muslim friend at Tufts as an instance of *da'wa*: after a chance meeting and a long chat during the Walk for Diabetes, this friend encouraged me to get involved with the MSA because I was a Middle Eastern Studies major and it would help me learn about Islam. I never thought of the exchange as akin to proselytizing, but her friendly openness led to years of MSA involvement, friendships with many other Muslims, and countless conversations about Islam which instilled in

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<sup>195</sup> Literally "witnessing"; the Muslim profession of faith and the phrase recited in order to convert to Islam. Arabic: "Ashhadu an la ilaha ilallah, wa ashhadu anna Muhammad rusulu Allah." English translation: "I witness that there is no god but God, and I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God." The *shahada* is only binding if it is recited in full three times in the presence of a witness; the chaplain taught me only the part after "Ashhadu an..."

<sup>196</sup> Field notes September 26, 2009.

me a deep respect for the faith (although I still have not thrown in that "Ashhadu!")

From the story of one convert, Molly [not her actual name], I gathered that this type of non-confrontational, educational *da'wa* could play a big role in the process of becoming Muslim. Molly grew up in a community that had a fairly large Muslim population. Both of her parents were Catholic, but she never completed confirmation and reported that Catholicism "didn't make sense" to her.<sup>197</sup> She became aware of Islam during high school, where she attended a few meetings of a Muslim student group that did little other than "a Facebook page and a T-shirt." Her interest continued into her freshman year at an out-of-state university, when she began to attend MSA events. At first, she asked a Muslim friend to go with her, but soon she felt comfortable going by herself.<sup>198</sup> The MSA there was screening Imam Zaid Shakir's "Back to Basics: Islam 101" video series.<sup>199</sup> That December, while home for Christmas break, Molly said the *shahada* and became Muslim. She soon transferred to Cannondale University, where I met her, and where a large number of the Muslims she grew up with also studied. She said it was "a given" that she would be involved in the MSA at Cannondale.<sup>200201</sup>

She says that "always having somebody to help" - her high school friends, the MSA community, her best friend from home, who taught her how to pray - was very important in her development as a Muslim. I saw Molly take the opportunity while mingling at an interfaith dessert function hosted by the Cannondale Catholic students center to ask the Muslim chaplain about what happens after death. She seemed very comfortable bringing up questions like these out of the blue, and he responded obligingly, even including me and another student in the

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<sup>197</sup> Field notes November 2, 2009.

<sup>198</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>199</sup> Field notes, November 2, 2009.

<sup>200</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>201</sup> Field notes, October 8, 2009.

conversation when we wandered up.<sup>202</sup> Molly mentioned that she appreciated Islamic Society of Cannondale's president because he was "not intimidating." "A non-intimidating environment makes it easy to come to things."<sup>203</sup> Molly's decision to embrace the religion came about through an individual quest. No one person seems to have pushed her toward Islam, but all seemed open to helping her along the way. The open, friendly, non-exclusive atmosphere that pervaded nearly all MSA events I attended nurtured her independently sown seeds of faith.

Interestingly, the presence of recent converts like Molly constituted a kind of *da'wa* feedback loop; born Muslims felt a sense of admiration toward those who had deliberately chosen Islam. I attended a women's *halaqa* at Molly's MSA to which a law student who had converted to Islam as an undergraduate was invited to speak. Though the student was prepared to lead a discussion about frugality and following the Prophet Muhammad's example, every girl in room clearly wanted to hear the story of her conversion. The law student humbly obliged, saying she was not sure it would be as "beneficial" as her original topic, but telling the story eloquently nonetheless. Molly was also encouraged to tell her story. The attendees listened raptly, then asked a profusion of questions about both women's experiences – their family's reaction, what it was like to adjust to an Islamic lifestyle, etc. Speaking from years of experiencing the same reaction, the law student said, "It's weird when Muslimas say, 'You're a better Muslim than me because you chose Islam.' I think Islam is a path, and everybody is on the same path struggling to get better."<sup>204</sup> Indeed, these young converts were treated like respected teachers by a room of women who had been Muslims on average twenty years longer than them.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Field notes, October 27, 2009.

<sup>203</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>204</sup> Field notes, November 2, 2009.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

*Keeping the faith: Da'wa to fellow Muslims*

While many of the Muslim students I interviewed emphasized the importance of teaching non-Muslims about Islam, at least as many strenuously stressed the need to get more Muslims involved with MSA. Like the early Islamic Revivalists, these young people envisioned the MSA as a vehicle for improving the community of the faithful. When asked what the most important goals of his group were, one president answered, "To spread Islam within and outside the Muslim community... There is just so much to lose [if either of these goals are not met]." This student even expressed concern for international students hailing from Muslim societies: "Saudis and Khalijees [from the Arabian Gulf] say, 'Why are you telling me about my own religion?' but sometimes they need it even more!"<sup>206</sup> Some students' answered the same question by saying that their Muslim peers needed to "unite"<sup>207</sup><sup>208</sup> - phrasing that evokes the global, trans-sectarian concept of the Muslim "umma". Finding and retaining their Muslim peers was an ongoing struggle for MSA leaders. One public relations chair said, "That people are pretty religious on the board might prevent people from coming."<sup>209</sup> Many others echoed this statement; MSA members were perceived as being the most "religious" or "conservative" Muslims (the students' own choice of words), and thus less practicing Muslims might feel intimidated.

When I asked interviewees how participating in the MSA had benefited them, they often said that being part of a community of believers was vital to their *iman*, or strength of faith.<sup>210</sup> It requires strong willpower to practice Islam in college - classes aren't scheduled around prayer times, Ramadan fasting can tax already depleted energy, and temptations such as alcohol and

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<sup>206</sup> Hamza, interview, November 4, 2009.

<sup>207</sup> Samira, interview, January 16, 2010.

<sup>208</sup> Maria, interview, January 24, 2010.

<sup>209</sup> Rahim, interview, January 26, 2010.

<sup>210</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

extramarital sex abound. The MSA community often provides material resources such as free *iftars* (fast-breaking meals), prayer spaces, or party-free housing opportunities; but many students cited the mere presence of other Muslims as invaluable. Some found it encouraging to know that other Muslims were around,<sup>211</sup> or that they knew where to go if they needed somebody to talk to.<sup>212</sup> One MSA member reported that receiving routine MSA-related e-mails helped him remember to pray.<sup>213</sup> A few students said that the quality of Muslim community and resources influenced a decision to transfer. “At [my previous school] there was no MSA. There was an imam on campus to ‘answer questions about Islam.’ That was not appealing at all. No Islamic community was definitely a factor in my transfer,”<sup>214</sup> said one. Clearly, solidarity counted for a lot.

Learning more about Islam, especially through *halaqas* in which students would read scriptures, listen to lectures, and discuss various tenets and stories, was said to be good for *iman*. Molly, the convert mentioned previously, said, "After any event, I feel rejuvenated and my faith is back, it's motivating, lots of learning, and social stuff helps as well."<sup>215</sup> E-lists constantly sent out advertisements for Islamic classes and seminars hosted by local mosques, especially the new ISBCC. For instance, several students at the Schwinn MSA carpooled to Bayyinah Institute's traveling seminar “Meaningful Prayer” for its free Friday night session. Most classes were free or offered subsidized tuition, and some even sent students overseas for a few weeks over the summer vacation. MSAs sometimes offered to pay for their members to attend these classes, perhaps requesting that the attendee share what he or she learned upon return.

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<sup>211</sup> Muhammad, interview, February 1, 2010.

<sup>212</sup> Aisha, interview, February 22, 2010.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Izdiyar, interview, November 12, 2009.

<sup>215</sup> Molly, interview, November 4, 2009.

Lara Deeb's research subjects likewise valued continuing Islamic education. "These women emphasized that actively seeking correct knowledge is an important part of piety itself... not only important to one's own piety, but was crucial for educating others in authenticated Islam."<sup>216</sup> Charles Hirschkind describes Egyptians listening to cassette sermons (sometimes over and over) not just to learn, but also to strengthen their will to be more pious.<sup>217</sup> Muslim Students Associations strived to supplement the learning opportunities for the campus Muslim community – ultimately a form of intra-community *da'wa*. I saw the work this did on individual students. Basma, for example, entered college fairly religious, but once there she found the independence and the resources to search out answers to her questions. Until joining the Muslim community at Schwinn, she had never fasted fully through Ramadan even up into high school because her mother had always thought of her as too young. Now she knew the religious stakes of fasting despite personal hardship. She donned the headscarf during Ramadan of her junior year – a major decision that young women described as a daunting, virtually irreversible commitment to moral behavior.<sup>218</sup> Basma's personal evolution toward greater piety would never have materialized without the MSA's support and institutional resources.

As my examples demonstrate, interfaith activities, intra- and inter-community *da'wa* all occur within Muslim Students Associations, and neither form of outreach can be considered fully compartmentalized from another. Interfaith activities could lead to religious conversion, conversion could lead to strengthening of born Muslims' piety, and so on. This interconnected "triad of outreach" operated within a unique space, a counterpublic, constituted by the MSA institution and also bound by the broader university community. The MSA counterpublic

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<sup>216</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 124.

<sup>217</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 71.

<sup>218</sup> Basma, interview, November 13, 2009.

facilitated life in service of God was for young Muslims, allowing piety to direct the course of outreach activities.

## Conclusions

My fieldwork among Muslim Students Associations has shown me that outreach is an integral part of what Muslim students are doing on campus. However, this outreach must be understood as more than mere efforts to polish the tarnished image of Muslims in post-9/11 America. Outreach encompasses a wide variety of activities by which young Muslims attempt to improve their relationship with non-Muslims, other Muslims and above all, God. True, an impetus for *da'wa* discourages that insularity and ghettoization which contributes to Muslim Otherness and Islamophobia. But more than that, *da'wa* is an act of faith. The students in my study are working to improve conditions for Islam itself - the faith, not just the identity. They are working to become more pious, to help their Muslim peers become more pious, and to spread the message of Islam. The triad of outreach - interfaith activities, *da'wa* to non-Muslims, and *da'wa* to other Muslims - makes outreach a dynamic process rooted in genuine piety.

Today's Muslim Students Associations are a product of their time. The September 11, 2001 attacks and the ensuing social and political pressures on Muslims set up a point of disruption at which a number of young Muslims took up their religious identities in ways they had not before the stakes were raised. They entered college seeking out a community of other Muslims, and found the Muslim Students Association. This space within the university provided a kind of counterpublic useful for negotiating what it means to be Muslim. But rather than merely gathering for solidarity around Islam as an identity, many of these students have delved deeply into their faith. It told them to look outward. While MSAs face challenges posed by the tensions between a drive for unity in a diverse religious community and the primacy of a normative Sunni piety, they have clearly disproved xenophobic political arguments by

demonstrating that deep faith in Islam can coexist with and even bolster a strong American identity. Even considering a multiplicity of transnational ties, these students feel and behave much more American than foreign. They have shown beyond doubt that non-radical Muslims are capable of, and indeed are regularly speaking up. They have done this without sacrificing a belief in religion that is integral to everyday life, rather than relegated to a hidden place. And as previous research has shown, Muslim Students Association members are likely to graduate with skills and experience that will help them continue to build strong community ties in the future.

The dearth of research on young Muslims in the United States begs to be remedied, and I have provided a limited study of a particular cross section of this population. Further research should strive to encompass the Muslim youth in all its diversity, and explore the differences in experience between students living in different parts of the country. It could include students attending public universities, or even the growing number of high schools with Muslim student groups. Future endeavors could focus on the differences between generations of American Muslims. In such an under-researched field, the possibilities are endless, but I especially urge future researchers to consider the role of piety – not just identity – in American Muslim communities. As MSA members' piety has led to community service and productive relationships with non-Muslims, there is certainly an opportunity to further explore how American Muslims' religion can contribute to American society.

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**Appendix I**  
**Muslim House Rules and Guidelines**<sup>†</sup>

**Hard Rules**

The hard rules are applicable to all areas within the limits of the Muslim House & areas

immediately surrounding it.† These rules are strictly enforced.† These rules apply to all who enter the house; Muslims, non-Muslims, residents & visitors.

1. Hours- “Quiet” hours after Midnight on weeknights (Sunday - Thursday). Music/noise just needs to be lowered to respectable level.
2. Dress –Modest dress that covers the body is required. Meaning, you should be properly covered from below the knee to at least cap-sleeve shirts. Tank tops and short skirts are not allowed and for guys, shirts MUST be worn at all times, This rule applies in all of the common areas, any mix-gender settings, and to all people who enter the house. (Note: it is the responsibility of House residents to inform their guests of Dress rules)
3. Substance-free – Alcohol, addictive drugs, or tobacco are ABSOLUTELY PROHIBITED within the House’s limits, including common & private areas.
4. No Pork – Any types of pork products are not allowed within the limits of the House, including common & private areas.
5. Language – No foul language and/or expression permitted in common areas.
6. Physical Mal-intent – No physical mal-intent permitted within the limits of the House, including common & private areas.
7. Male/Female Interaction – No intimate physical contact between and amongst men & women. [Note: it is recommended that a man & a woman never be alone in a room together, unless the door of the room is open.† The basis of this recommendation is found in Hadith (Sahih Bukhari), Fiqh (as reported by Ibn Abbas), & Shari’a (in laws relating to Mahr)]. You are not allowed to have someone of the opposite sex spend the night in your room.
8. Decorations – Any common area decor must be approved by at least one of the House managers before being placed.
9. Private area – Each House residents’ privacy must be respected; enter private area only if permitted by the resident of that said space.
10. Viewing – Television programming and/or magazines should conform to House Dress Code in all communal areas. No material of an explicit (i.e. pornographic) nature shall be allowed in the House under any circumstance.
11. Muslim House’s Property – Moving or storing any materials that belong to the Muslim House requires the permission of the House Managers.
12. Cleanliness – All residents are held responsible in keeping all the common areas clean and tidy. As found in the Hadith (Sahih Muslim), the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Cleanliness is half of faith.”
13. Complaints – All complaints and/or communal concerns should be directed to House Manager(s).

## **Soft Rules**

These soft rules are applied to all areas within the limits of the House and its immediate surrounding area. These rules are moderately enforced. These rules also apply to all who enter the house; Muslims, non-Muslims, residents and visitors. These rules are different from the hard rules in that the House’s residents determine them, by way of consensus. These rules, therefore,

can be changed, amended, or in any way modified, throughout the year(s) by the House's contingency in residence. Normally, however, soft rules are to be agreed upon by consensus at the beginning of each academic year by all House residents.

14. Dress – Residents and/or guests do not have to be dressed as per required by the hard rule on dress, if they are going straight to a private area but no inappropriate clothing is permitted.
15. Viewing – Residents define the minimum standards of decency as applicable to permissible television programming and/or magazines.

#### Hard Common Areas vs. Soft Common Areas

The Hard Common Areas include the Kitchen, the Lounge, rooms that have their doors open & any all mixed settings (other than those mentioned in the section of Soft Common Area). The intent is to have participants & visitors respect communal rules in communal settings.

The Soft Common Areas are the hallways, staircase (House) & stairwell, common areas to and from the person's room, the main doorway & entrance, & the immediate surroundings of the House. The intent is to respect participants' & visitors' personal privilege in communal & private settings. Residents may not limit the use of any and all common areas to other residents.

#### Communal Areas vs. Private Areas

Communal Areas include the Kitchen, the Lounge & rooms, which have their doors open.

Private Areas include ONLY one's room.

**The House Manager has complete right to confiscate any materials and/or enforce rules, as he/she deems appropriate.**