

The Education of American Muslims: Knowledge and Authority in Intensive Islamic Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

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This ethnographic study explores the ways in which religious teachers use intensive Islamic learning environments as sites to reshape understandings of Islam amongst American Muslims of Sunni orientation. The absence of longstanding traditional Islamic educational institutions in the United States poses challenges for Muslims looking to learn about Islam beyond parental teachings and Sunday schools. However, a range of innovative transmedial learning environments, bridging offline and online spaces, have emerged in recent decades. This is the first ethnographically informed study of such spaces which attends to the role of knowledge and the multidimensional nature of authority in the education of American Muslims.

Using 10 months of fieldwork in Canada, the United States, and Turkey, I draw on and explore narratives of students and teachers, revealing the bodies of knowledge that teachers deem relevant for the development of an American Muslim self and how these teachers situate their authority within a tradition of knowledge transmission. These narratives demonstrate how students seek out certain types of knowledge to develop their religious identities, and the ways teachers respond by selecting and deploying these and other bodies of knowledge in their teaching. Teachers and their associated educational programmes use various pedagogical techniques and accessories to link students to the imagined international Muslim community. This leads to an understanding of how teachers situate their authority within a tradition of knowledge transmission. These teachers ground narratives of self and place within religious and regional histories to define religious practice that is ethical and culturally relevant, and justify their own authority.

This research contributes to debates on the challenges of intra-Muslim dialogue in relation to the *umma*. It is a ground-breaking empirical study illustrating how, despite the tense geopolitics surrounding Islam and Muslims, American Muslim communities in the 21st century sustain Islamic tradition by developing an Islamic pedagogy relevant to its historical roots and contemporary possibilities in a digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I explore the narratives of young American Muslim knowledge seekers and the teachers they learn from, to understand the nature and role of knowledge and authority in contemporary Islamic learning environments. Teacher narratives illustrate how meetings in offline and online spaces reveal an understanding of Islamic knowledge, seen as beneficial by both teacher and student, and provide an understanding of elements needed for students to consider teachers as legitimate transmitters of knowledge. Student narratives bring together themes of emergent adulthood and challenges American Muslims face in their everyday lives. Thus, students articulate a need for religious guidance and set out on self-guided journeys of discovery. Abdurak's narrative below offers an introduction to understanding motivations for seeking religious guidance.

Abdurazak: A Portrait

Abdurazak stands at the edge of the pond, on a university campus in Michigan, gazing at the fountain at its centre. Water gushes out of a hidden spout and splashes into the surrounding pool. The sound of birds is slightly muted and the sun shines brightly above. From time to time he reaches down to pick pebbles from the grass, and skips them across the water, casting ripples upon its surface. One, two, three. Still, he remains there standing, sometimes pacing or staring out at the pond, while the rest of the students congregate in small groups. It's a familiar view I have of him during the three weeks he sequesters himself with his peers to develop a deeper understanding of his faith.

When he isn't talking with the other students or kicking around a soccer ball, Abdurazak is alone, thinking. "I obviously like being around people, but I also like having my time to think. To see what is happening to me. How am I changing? To just reflect on that", he says. It provides an air of mystery to him in the eyes of many of the young women in the programme. I overhear whispers about him and even a vocal comment from two on how interesting he seems. However,

the strong adherence of the women's parents to their Pakistani culture seems to kill any further exploration into his marriage eligibility. When I sit down to talk with him mid-way through his time in the programme, his back stands rigid against the back of the chair, and his hands unclasp and clasp as he tells me about his journey, packing and unpacking his Muslim identity.

Abdurazak was born in a village outside the capital of Ethiopia soon after the fall of the Mengistu government. The political instability of the early '90s precipitated large-scale displacement of refugees fleeing the country, as well as in neighbouring Somalia. Soon after, his mother, a teenage widow, moved to the capital, seeking better financial opportunities. After a few years of being unable to find a stable and lucrative position, Abdurazak's mother, taking the suggestion and assistance of her sister, resettled them in a refugee camp in Djibouti, where the vast majority of Ethiopians and Somalis resided, given the untenable nature of life in their own countries. There, she worked as a house-hand in the homes of wealthy Arab and French expats in the city. Her intent was to eventually make it to America.

For close to seven years, Abdurazak lived in a tent under the care of his aunt and uncle, seeing his mother once a year. "I never really knew what my identity was at that time. I didn't really know who my mom was. I believed my aunt was my mom and at some point I came to the realization that she's not my mom," he recalls. Just like his living situation, Abdurazak's identity was unstable and incoherent. His aunt's husband wasn't Muslim, yet, he recalls going to the mosque from time to time. Who was his mother? Was he Muslim? These questions plagued Abdurazak. The intimidation and violent tactics of the newly established government enabled his family to achieve asylum in the United States. At the age of eight he and his mother moved to the United States, joining his aunt and her children in a small apartment. After some time, his mother took him away from the family home. The rupture in the family clarified which sister was his mother. However, it led to a long break in relations between the two families. "My aunt, I didn't get to speak to her for like 10 years. I couldn't keep contact with her. She wouldn't answer any of our calls and vice versa," he says. The pain of the break was too much and at some point, Abdurazak confronted his mother in confusion.

I asked my mom and it was just a combination of different things that she told me that I really couldn't understand. Somehow it was my fault. I don't know how I could be blamed if I'm like a little kid. My aunt really liked me, and she loved me. For the most part, I

thought she was my mom. So, I don't know. I guess that could have been an issue too. In 2009, March 2009, my aunt passed away with cancer. My mom went to visit her pretty much on her last breaths. I didn't get to see her. I didn't get to speak to her. I didn't get anything.

Instability stayed with Abdurazak, now eight years old, as his mother moved them to different cities for the next three years. When he was eleven his mother decided to relocate to Phoenix. At what is now his fifth school, his ignorance of the role of his race in his new country comes to the fore.

I couldn't speak English right. I would never have friends I guess. They'd be like "oh, African booty scratcher." And there weren't any Ethiopians. I actually remember when I was like in 4th grade, the lunch bell rang, and everyone was going to lunch and I don't even know what's going on. There was an African American girl. She was a little darker than me. As a child I'm thinking, she's Ethiopian. So, I go up to her and talk to her in my language. She just stares at me and is like, this idiot. Like, what?? I'll never forget that. That's pretty much how my whole life is I guess. You get that dumb face like you don't fit in. And I don't try to fit in either.

Abdurazak navigated the stages of his education alone, never troubling his mother with any issues he faced. Islam was still an unknown element in his life. "I never really knew what Islam was. I know we'd go to 'Eid. We'd pray. I know we would go to the mosque," he says. As he got older, he watched his mother pray but never asked her about it. A barrier always seemed to be between them. "I don't know who she is. And I always just think maybe her parents...you know African parents aren't really that emotional. She probably didn't have that growing up. So, for me to demand that from her is kind of unreasonable," he concludes. So he would observe her, listen to any directives she gave and follow them, at least the ones he could. "You know, every single day she would tell me to pray. And I would just keep it to myself, but my answer would be, I don't know how to pray. But I would just be like yea, you're right," Abdurazak says. By the time he reached high school Abdurazak could no longer accept the opaqueness that obscured much of his thinking around his religious identity. "I became more self-motivated. I don't know what it was. I can't honestly say. I just wanted to know who I was. I taught myself how to pray. I taught myself how to read Arabic." His do-it-yourself method wasn't facilitated by the Internet, which at this time was still undeveloped and only accessible via dial-up. Instead, books were his go-to source for knowledge.

I remember there was an Islamic store. I would be like “hey mom, can I have money?” and I would go buy books. So, I bought small books on how to pray, simple books like that. Then I would like to teach myself the [Arabic] alphabet. Then I learned how to read [Arabic]. Then I would teach myself the *sūras* (Qur’ān chapters) I knew.

Working to support a family on her own didn’t leave Abdurazak’s mother the time to pay attention to the minutiae of his life. As a result, she didn’t query him on how he spent this money. With no teacher, no internet, and no videos, Abdurazak taught himself what he needed to know for his basic practice. The proliferation of new educational institutions and presence of various American Muslim teachers and preachers would not begin to peak until the mid-2000s. His new knowledge also led him to the local mosque, where he attended weekly study circles that provided lessons about the biography of the Prophet, the Prophet's companions, and meanings of short chapters in the Qur’ān. By the time he entered college, Abdurazak had more knowledge under his belt. He took courses on Islam and others in the Arabic language. He would later get involved in the activities of the Muslim Students Association, participating in events to spread knowledge on campus about Muslims and Islam.

Now, in 2013, aged 22 and a recent college graduate, Abdurazak is set on a path of self-discovery, with Islam as a compass.

At this point in my life, I would say it’s the centrepiece. Everything else revolves around it. Everything that I do is kind of based on it now. If I do things, whatever they are...if I’m doing things for the community it’s because of my regard for Islam. Just the sense that you’re doing things for the sake of God. That becomes the centre of everything you do.

These days, with the widespread use of technology and social media platforms being used by well-known Muslim intellectuals, Abdurazak has added YouTube videos and podcasts from popular preachers and teachers to his learning resource list. It’s facilitated the development of his Muslim identity, and at the same time made it clear there was more to know.

It gives me short packages and I keep learning more and more. At a certain point, I’ll have to go to a different source and learn more. That’s why I always wanted to study Islam, I think ever since I was in university. I want to study somewhere. I want to actually learn Arabic to the extent that I go somewhere and learn. But that’s wishful thinking on my part. I feel I have a bigger responsibility to go and care for my family.

He now has a fifteen-year-old sister and another sister eight years younger than him, as well as two other teenaged siblings. His mother is their sole provider. He skips over how this all came to

be, and I'm left unsure if he's hesitant or just doesn't know. "She umm...I don't know, she had a husband and it didn't work out," he says. Nonetheless, Abdurazak tries to bring them together in their religious practice.

I make...well, with them, they actually go to Sunday school and they actually go and learn Qur'ān. So that's good. They have that. So, you know, simple things, we wake up to pray for *fajr*. That's something I did at the beginning of this year. I don't know, maybe as an attempt to get closer to my mom.

When I follow-up and ask him if it's working, his answer saddens him. He looks down before looking back up at me. "Not really. My mom is not really an emotional person. I'm probably the same way. We never really lived together for that long. We were just put together," he replies despondently. "I'm obedient to her. I do whatever she tells me and we talk about simple things. Just basic conversations. We never get deep."

Abdurazak's desire to learn more about Islam is similar to many of his peers who recognize the limits of an autodidactic method which fails to result in a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Islam, for practice. Despite the advances he has made in filling the empty spaces in his socioreligious development, Abdurazak perceives his knowledge as shallow.

The stuff that I know is not in-depth as I want it to be. Like if we learn in Islamic school, Sunday school, this is the way to pray but we don't go in-depth in things and actually understanding. I can teach myself how to read and write, but when it comes to religion, I never really...you can't really understand how complicated Islam is. It's simple but it's not.

The three-week summer programme in Michigan at the American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM) was recommended to him by an older mentor from his mosque.

I kind of didn't know about ALIM until about a week before the programme started. But I've always wanted to study. I thought I was going to go and study in like Saudi or something...I've always wanted to definitely build on my Islamic knowledge."

ALIM would prove to be a novel opportunity, deepening his understanding of Islam while allowing him to maintain proximity to home and fulfil his familial obligations.

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Abdurazak's story illustrates various elements of contemporary Muslim life in the United States as it relates to confessional education. These include a desire to learn more about Islam for personal development, a search for relevancy in the public sphere, the gaps in religious upbringing, and familial as well as professional responsibilities which cannot be abandoned, all of which come to bear on one's decision to participate in transient pedagogical spaces. The majority of students attending these educational programmes, born or having spent their formative years in the United States living as a religious minority, naturally question elements of the religious features of their daily lives. As emerging adults between the ages of 18-30, their development is most characterised by a preoccupation with identities, transition, family, love, and future aspirations. They grapple with the demands placed on them by members both inside and outside of their religious community and struggle to reconcile their national, religious, ethno-racial, and other identities. Religious teachers are a source of guidance on how to navigate these multiple challenges.

Prophetic injunctions such as: "If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise..."¹; "And he who treads the path in search of knowledge, Allah would make that path easy, leading to Paradise for him..."²; and "...The scholars are the heirs of the prophets..."³ all emphasise the high value placed on knowledge. Life-long learning has been a basis for Islamic piety but Rosenthal's (2007) work shows the elusiveness of the definition of knowledge, as he charts its meanings from pre-Arabia to the height of Islamic civilisation, which circled around the knower, knowledge, and object.

¹ Muslim: Book 48, chapter 11, Hadith 2699

² Sunan Abi Dawud: Hadith 3634

³ Sunan Abi Dawud: Hadith 3634

Nonetheless, he demonstrates how “knowledge” dominated the intellectual, spiritual, and social life of Muslims and that no part of Muslim life “remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude toward ‘knowledge’ as something of supreme value for the Muslim being” (p. 2). Knowledge derived from the Qur’ān and its ancillary texts was the foundation for the moral compass of the Muslim self. As Robinson (2010) states, “without knowledge there could be no salvation” (p. 497). Furthermore, the importance of knowledge, education, and learning can be seen textually, in that the word *‘ilm* (knowledge) is the third most used term in the Qur’ān (Boyle 2004) and that the second most used term is *rabb* or “educator”, as espoused by Ramadan (2004), or someone that takes care of one’s needs.

The political events of the past decade, both at home and abroad, have placed Islamic education under a microscope. “There are one million students studying in the country’s 10,000 or so *madrasas*, and militant Islam is at the core of most of these schools,” (Goldberg, 2000) says a widely cited New York Times article about religious schools in Pakistan. A post-9/11 socio-political climate across the globe has shuttled Islam and Muslims to the forefront of discussions in the public sphere. As a result, media outlets often equate *madrasas* (places of learning or ‘school’) with training grounds for terrorism, creating a singular vilifying narrative of Islamic education (IPPR, 2011; McClure, 2009). The learning process is depicted using images of rocking children with Qur’ans in hand, alongside those of men carrying machine guns. These images are aimed at revealing students in the throes of a radicalisation process, supposedly inherent to Islamic education curricula. The effect of this is most acutely described by Winkler (2002) in addressing the negative connotation attributed to the term “rote education”. She explains that

“...in a subtle bit of linguistic sleight of hand, the pejorative term ‘rote memorization’ is commonly used as synonymous with memorization tout court. It’s almost always

contrasted with comprehension and critical thinking—as if knowing things and thinking about things were mutually exclusive...” (p. 1)

This depiction is problematic in that it showcases one mode of learning, one type of institution, in one regional context, yet creates a totalising generalisation of assumptions regarding Muslim educational institutions and their objectives. Simply put, this essentialised narrative communicates that Muslims engaged in religious learning intend violence. Moreover, the vast majority of perceptions disseminated by media outlets use the actions of Muslim groups in certain areas of the world as foundations for totalising narratives for Muslims everywhere. This is problematic given that, as Thobani (2010) states “the primary conduit of information for the American public on the Muslim world is the mass media, which exerts a significant influence on how parents, teachers, and students perceive Muslims and arrive at an understand of Islam” (p. 20). Thus, there is a need to interrogate discourses around Western Muslims and their religious educational pursuits.

Research on Muslims living in European societies has often focused on socio-political activities and issues related to assimilation and integration (Cesari, 2009). This attention, by both government and academics, sought to identify ways to integrate the diversity of people from several Muslim-majority countries in South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa into various sectors of society. Cesari (2009), whose work primarily focuses on European Muslims, contends that in the 1980s academics began to focus their attention on the role of religion in the integration process, and inquired into the role of mosques, Islamic schools, and religious authorities. In the United States, research has addressed various histories of American Muslims. These studies have been diverse and detailed, addressing the early presence of Muslims from Africa who traded with Native Americans (Van, 1976), Muslims who arrived as slaves (Diouf,

1998), different waves of immigration primarily from the Middle East and South Asia (Haddad, 2002), and the multiple shifts in black American Muslim communities (Jackson, 2005). These projects have contributed to attempts to destabilise the reified dichotomisation of Islam and the West and dispel negative stereotypes of Muslims. Moreover, research of this nature highlights narratives that show that Muslims have always been a part of American society, while also demonstrating how immigrants acclimate to society. Each of these studies presents the impossibility of attempting to define or quantify American or Muslim identities.

However, there remains a dearth of research related to the education of Muslims outside mainstream schooling. Extant research in Western societies extends to private Islamic schools (Zine, 2008; Memon, 2009) (below the age of 18) and weekend mosque schools in Europe (Peter, 2006), which focus on imams as religious authorities. Few studies offer the chance to hear voices of “lay” Muslims (Karim, 2009) in religious educational institutions and the place of knowledge and their teachers in facilitating challenges faced living in secular societies. The most extensive research about confessional religious learning outside of mandatory school age, in the American context, is Grewal’s (2015) ethnographic exploration of “student-travellers” from the United States traveling to the Middle East to learn from “custodians” who mediate the religious tradition. Thus, my research study considers Muslim learners beyond the age of 18, who travel to Western cities to gain knowledge of their religious tradition from popular teachers.

Throughout this thesis I often refer to Muslim practice as being part of *tradition*. This is not meant to imply any singularity of Muslim practice. I limit myself to the ways in which my research participants explore and construct Muslim practice according to Sunni traditions. I use Asad’s (1986) concept of discursive tradition, “a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses

itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present” (p. 20), to empirically understand knowledge and authority in its configuration for American Muslim practice. Asad explains further:

A tradition is in part concerned with the way limits are constructed in response to problems encountered and conceptualized. There’s always a tension between this construction of limits and the forces that push the tradition onto new terrain, where parts or all of the tradition ceases to make sense and so needs a new beginning. And looked at another way: with each new beginning, there is the possibility of a new (or “revived”) tradition, a new story about the past and future, new virtues to be developed, new projects to be addressed (Scott, 2006, p. 289).

Asad’s work is important for this research study given that the process of education in learning environments is a vehicle by which tradition reconceptualises and communicates new stories for future pasts. Moreover, Asad (2017) states that “A discursive tradition is not a bubble in which one is located but a set of aspirations, sensibilities, commitments, and relationships of subjects who live and move in the different times of a common world” (p.200). Therefore, I present student aspirations and sensibilities as they relate to knowledge journeys, and those of the teachers and learning environments they traverse, and the commitments and relationships which reveal themselves therein. I explore ways in which authority is constructed and maintained vis-à-vis the production and transmission of knowledge, in light of the histories, socio-political changes, globalisation, and imperatives of a technological age.

American Muslims experience the impact of geopolitical manoeuvres by Muslims in Muslim-majority countries. They contend with this while developing their own identities in the pluralistic nature of their minority contexts. As Haddad and Esposito (2000) remark, “American Muslims are viewed through the prism of global politics in Muslim-majority countries” (p. 13). The rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in America and other Western nations illustrates this point.

Many Muslims embrace the concept of *umma* (global community), connecting them to Muslims all over the world. Karim (2009) defines the term as “a sense of global belonging” (p. 6) and sees it as “a key factor in the transnational personal and societal identities of Muslims” (p. 6). The *umma* is imbued with a fraternal sense, thus establishing fictive kinships across space and time. The community, tied by a common tradition, is defined by the Qur’ān, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, ritual practices, and proselyting. However, as Berkey (2001) stresses, “the meaning and social significance of these elements are by no means clear and unproblematic: they will vary according to historical context and will frequently erupt with internal conflict” (p. 9). This problematises the singular narratives that are often applied by the media to one billion people over a span of multiple regions and over a millennium of history.

It should be noted that whilst American Muslims are primarily seen through the prisms of geopolitics, historically, communities have grappled with tensions between their national affiliations and their new homes in America. As Chapter 3 will further explain, conflicts arose between Muslim communities in regard to determining who had the most legitimacy to define authentic American Muslim practices. Early religious discourses revolved around political issues in Muslim-majority countries from which immigrants had come, instead of issues around social justice in which black communities remained mired. Convert Muslims also took on these discourses. As an example, Hamza Yusuf, the leading voice in American Muslim educational discourse, was a fierce critic of U.S. foreign policy and his fiery lectures endeared him to Muslims worldwide. It begged the question, however: where was the *umma*? As the subsequent chapters make evident, socio-political changes caused much of this type of rhetoric to die down and a degree of American exceptionalism has since seeped into current discourses. American Muslim

teachers not only outline authentic practice for Muslims in America but often, in the eyes of their audiences, their lack of “Muslim cultural” baggage and American freedom of religious practice positions them as capable of discerning a perceived core of Islam, unmaintainable by those who carry cultural practices from Muslim-majority countries or those associated with political groups. Teachers are therefore charged not only with maintaining an idea of collective history whilst reshaping Islamic tradition for an American imperative, but also with ensuring that their audiences simultaneously remain true to their local context and their obligations to a global community. Thus, while teachers define who Muslims are, in the face of heightened violence from the *umma*, they must also define who they are not—complicating the very notion of *umma* when it comes to religious adherents across the world.

Nonetheless, the continued media focus on the practices of Muslims in one regional context, and the projection of this singular image into the public domain, would suggest that there is a unified narrative of Islam. However, such an approach is not only myopic given the use of an orientalist lens, but also because it fails to contend with the ways in which beliefs, culture, and politics undergird processes of change across the globe. This elides the practices of Muslims in other regional contexts. Thus, while there is an acknowledgement of Muslims across the globe, there is also a need to attend to the specifics of a different context to avoid unrealistic generalisations. This requires a careful probing of the ways in which the Islamic tradition continues its discursive recalibration that is simultaneously both local and global. American Muslims are therefore engaged in process of defining who they are, and at the same time, who they are not in relation to their co-religionists.

Research by Ramadan (2004) and Chaudhury and Miller (2008) conclude that Islamic knowledge, whether the process of knowledge acquisition or individual questions around tenets of faith, practice or interpretation, is a defining element of the development of religious identity. Religious teachers are charged with distilling life guidelines from the revealed texts, revealing inextricable links with authority. In this thesis, I explore how Islamic tradition is reconfigured for an American context, with what knowledge and by whom, and how specific bodies of knowledge are curated by religious teachers to contribute to the construction of Muslim selves. As Gaffney (1994) succinctly puts it, “[f]or knowledge to be socially effective, it must be converted into authority and for authority to be established it must be projected as knowledge” (p. 35). Knowledge and authority are inextricably linked to one another. The presence of one implies the presence of the other—in a knowledge tradition. However, to be successful in effecting change, teachers’ authority, which is always under negotiation, must acquire some sense of stability. By exploring pedagogical spaces, this study reveals the various types and ways knowledge is used to construct and maintain authority, while being buttressed by other components which allow for reshaping of Islamic tradition, and as a result shape the erected boundaries for acceptable Muslim practice.

Chapter Outlines

The first two chapters of the thesis offer a historical background to traditions of Arabo-Islamic learning, as well as a contemporary view of the Muslim educational landscape in the United States. Whilst the historical component focuses on Muslims, the reader should not lose sight of the fact that non-Muslims are very much a part of the history of Muslim societies. This is the case both in historical and contemporary writings, as becomes evident in the chapters that

follow, which describe the ways some American Muslims see themselves in relation to their fellow citizens. The historical portion bends towards a reading of the historiography of Sunni tradition, with a focus on Arabo-Islamic learning. This is primarily the case as this serves as the departure point for the educational projects of the religious teachers within this study. The contemporary chapter begins with a glance at the development of research on Western Muslims and highlights a dearth of research on informal spaces and American Muslims.

Each of the ethnographic chapters begins with a portrait of one student from the four learning environments, showcasing the complexities which arise at the intersections of faith, race, ethnicity, class, gender, family, and education. These young Muslims inform us about the rationale behind seeking knowledge about Islam from an influential religious teacher, to facilitate the continued construction of their Muslim identities. Furthermore, their narratives highlight the different needs of American Muslim youth, providing insight into the concerns religious teachers attend to, in order to maintain relevancy. Therefore, each findings chapter provides a vivid portrayal of the ways in which each of the learning environments provide offline and online spaces for teachers to use specific bodies of knowledge, and other elements, to reconfigure Islamic tradition, demonstrating the authority which their audience has conferred upon them.

Chapter 1 explores the historical role of knowledge in Muslim life with a focus on teachers as transmitters of knowledge. I introduce histories of Islamic intellectualism and prominent places of learning in the medieval period, while highlighting the role teachers played in training teachers. I present ways in which knowledge was historically classified by a learned elite during the height of Islamic scholarship and show how, despite the firm grip of the learned

elite on knowledge production and transmission, various other interlocutors of the text competed with these scholars to address the laity. Considering this, I attend to the similarities between present roles of modern leaders and preachers in the various places and discuss ways in which technological advancements have and continue to influence the development of religious authorities.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the ways in which socio-political changes in the United States and global politics have impacted the development of different Muslim communities. The development of communities along ethno-racial lines contributes to the development of different educational institutions with specific curricula to address the different needs of these communities. I identify provisions for Muslim education from childhood to (emerging)adulthood. I also explore the ways in which technology has contributed to providing online learning provisions for knowledge seekers, also contributing to the reshaping and maintenance of religious authority. I conclude by discussing the ways technology has contributed to the educational landscape, enabling students to access knowledge independently, as well as from faraway preachers and teachers, creating further competition between voices which speak on behalf of Islam.

Chapter 3 discusses the synergies between the methodological framework and the genealogy of Islamic knowledge acquisition and transmission in which research participants are rooted, to demonstrate the rationale for my analytical framing. This allows for an exploration of the dynamics of time and space that shape the transmission of knowledge and the development of religious authority. I offer a brief statement of my own positionality and how it relates to the choice of research sites, as well as relationships with research respondents. I end with a

discussion of the balance needed between university ethics guidelines and those of the communities of practice of students and their teachers.

Chapter 4 offers the beginning of the ethnographic exploration of four intensive learning environments. The first occurs in Toronto, Canada, wherein teachers work to resuscitate the spiritual disposition of students while encouraging them to act ethically in the world. I present brief biographies of popular teachers to show how their personal histories influence their educational philosophies and the type of knowledge they articulate as being the most important for students to acquire, to develop their Muslim identities. I demonstrate how some teachers use traditional training overseas to position themselves as direct inheritors of pre-modern Islam. These teachers identify knowledge from classical texts which focus on the development of moral character as the way to develop a Muslim self which will have a positive impact on society. Additionally, I look at teachers with less formal training but secular degree qualifications who highlight the importance of knowledge and explicit action to change society, demonstrating one's attention to the ethics of Islam. While some teachers focus on the importance of learning and cultivating a dignified disposition, others encourage students to think outside of their own personal development and engage in acts of social justice. Furthermore, I reveal how formal study, cultural knowledge, and proficiency in the Arabic language are the base elements for the development of an understanding of the levels and dimensions of authority.

Chapter 5 builds on the identification of classical texts authored by illustrious Muslim thinkers, taught by teachers with traditional formal training, proficiency in Arabic, and knowledge of the context, as elements needed for establishing religious authority. These teachers root their practice in a neo-Traditionalist paradigm that gives primacy to the role of

authentic texts (secondary sources of knowledge—beyond the Qur’ān and Sunnah) and the *ijāza* (teaching license) system which enables the process of transmission to continue. This paradigm relies on a specific interpretation of the narration of the speech of Prophet Muhammad, which encompasses the mind, body, and soul, characterised by: (1) the transmission of knowledge through an unbroken chain of narrators from Prophet Muhammad and (2) strict adherence to one of the four schools of law. I show how teachers use historically resonant locations to supplement the teaching of discrete bodies of knowledge. Students visit Konya, the city of the great Sufi, Rumi, learning about him in lectures while also traveling to his tomb and touring his city. In the last few days of their journey, students view remnants of Ottoman rule by visiting popular tourist sites in Istanbul, observing what teachers deem a product of balanced practice. The three-week sojourn provides students with knowledge, from three of the four schools of law, related to purification, prayer, financial transactions, marriage and divorce, as well as spiritual practices linked to dimensions of Sufism to develop identities that adhere to the law as well as its spirit.

Chapter 6 continues to examine how teachers’ biographies influence the content and form of knowledge reproduction in reconfiguring the religious tradition for American Muslims. Teachers in Detroit, Michigan highlight the significance of tradition whilst drawing parallels between narratives of seventh-century Arabia and an American milieu. Similar to the use of historically resonant locations in the previous chapter, student visits to local community institutions, such as historic mosques and museums, are aimed at mooring their identities. However, I reveal that transmission of specific knowledge isn’t the objective but is rather used to provide a foundation for students to explore and analyse the development of tradition. The

presence of teachers with classical training, as well as those without, demonstrates the way secular higher education degrees can supplant formal study, while Arabic proficiency and cultural knowledge remain constant.

Chapter 7 provides a final view of knowledge and authority by demonstrating how a teacher provides students with knowledge of Arabic language so that they can access exegetical texts, typically read by a religious elite. I provide an account of a nine-month Qur'ānic Arabic programme in Dallas, Texas, primarily led by one teacher, who encourages students to directly access the text and its secondary commentaries to make sense of their own lives. The teacher's use of secondary texts demonstrates the value given to tradition; however, this use is referential, as the teacher directly accesses the primary texts himself. An examination of his educational biography shows how a lack of classical training and a secular higher education still allow for legitimate authority, due to the possession of knowledge of the Arabic language, and cultural competencies. In this way, the teacher gives license to students, as well as himself, to bypass any need for formal study. Furthermore, while presented as a language programme, the teacher moves beyond language instruction, providing students with life guidance using primary texts and an understanding of cultures in America and Muslim-majority countries to buttress his authority.

Chapter 8 draws together findings from each of the learning environments, summarising the various ways in which teachers recalibrate Islamic Sunni tradition for an American Muslim audience. This includes knowledge teachers view as vital for students and the elements used to establish their authority as legitimate interlocutors of religious texts. I argue that the life histories of these religious teachers and their educational experiences influence their juridical theology

and their resultant educational philosophies. Their different approaches establish that, while transnational communities share similar signs, symbols, and histories, a concentration on specific narratives and their varying interpretations illustrate how students influence the ways in which teachers use these elements to construct and maintain religious authority. Furthermore, I reveal how teachers invoke a shared sense of *umma* and insist on particularities of tradition, demonstrating how one can be both global and local at the same time—adhering to a collective history, while noting the specificities of one’s location. Through this process, teachers and students develop an Islamic pedagogy that is relevant and culturally responsive to the needs of Muslims in contemporary Western contexts.

CHAPTER 1: MUSLIMS AND A TRADITION OF LEARNING

Teaching and learning are integral to Islamic tradition and are the means of its continued development and survival. The Qur'ān identifies Prophet Muhammad as the standard for exemplary behaviour and he, in turn, highlights the behaviour of his companions, and the righteous believers who come after him, as a source of guidance for future generations. But how do Muslims come to know the Prophet so as to determine the best way to practice their faith? The analogy of rain giving substance to soil (Gunther, 2006) is an illustrative example of how classical thinkers perceived the process of teaching and learning as it relates to the development of the Muslim self.

I begin with an historical exploration of the modes of Arabo-Islamic teaching and learning within a specific period, in the vein of Wadad Kadi's (2007) periodisation. I explore the various types of interlocutors who contributed to the development of a collective memory that goes back to the Prophet, and the methods they used to continue the process of knowledge in Muslim societies in and around the Middle East. This overview is not meant to suggest an essential view of Islam or the application of a singular filter that is characterised by an Arab or Sunni interpretation in discussing the narratives of the history of religious learning. Rather, it is to provide a setting to demonstrate the role of Arabic language as a medium of scholarship in the classical period and how this contributes to historiography of early Muslim societies (Robinson, 2002). Moreover, Robinson (2002) notes that the structure established by the writing of history in the ninth century in Arabic dictated much of what was written by Muslims writing in Persian and Turkish centuries later. It should be noted that subsequent studies on the history of Islamic learning in regions such as West Africa or South Asia are plentiful. Nonetheless, this

chapter provides a short historical examination of a tradition of learning, places of learning, the classification of knowledge, and the different types of teachers and preachers who saw their role as custodians, transmitters and authorities of tradition in the period to which religious teachers in the contemporary period often refer.

A Tradition of Learning

The Qur'ān, the primary religious text, was preserved largely through the process of memorisation, part and parcel of the oral tradition of the Arabs at the time of Prophet Muhammad, although many of his companions wrote down many verses (Abdel Haleem, 2016). The companions and subsequent generations in various regions such as Basra, Medina, Mecca, Yemen, and so forth, differed in the ways in which they engaged with orality and writing about the transmission of tradition (Cook & Malkawi, 2010). Nonetheless the written word gained prominence, as evidenced by writings in ancient monographs emphasising the importance of knowledge and texts. Cook and Malkawi (2010) state that the tradition of teaching and learning reached fruition during the period from the eighth to thirteenth centuries. Robinson (2003) states the process was very much political in nature, part of a “larger reorganizing and focusing of social power” (p. 40), and knowledge became linked to the written culture of those who interpreted the Qur'ān, hadith, and *akhbar* (reports) (Afsaruddin, 2005). Much of what is known about the realm learning is often gathered from Ibn Nadīm, (d. 995) a Shi'ite Muslim from Baghdad. His index, *al-Fihrist*, is a book of books that “offers a comprehensive survey of Arabic books and learning, together with biographical information about their authors” (Robinson, 2004, p. 4).

Baghdad was a hotbed of knowledge and intellectual advancement at the time the capital of the Islamic empire was moved there from Damascus. It was ripe for the foundation of such a degree of intellectual stimulation that occurred centuries later, perhaps, as Lindberg (1992) states, given the previous Persian occupation and the intellectual capital that resided in the city. Furthermore, the acceleration of the collecting and categorising of literature may have been a political move by the Abbasids, whereby they would be seen as legitimate rulers assuming the ideology indigenous to Sassanids, and showing the ruler as a patron of learning, “specifically as a patron of the translation of lost or neglected books” (Lindberg, 1992, p. 170). Although this may be an attempt at an explanation, it does not take away from the flurry of translation over the next hundreds of years. Robinson (2004) states that the Arabs were selective about what they chose and disregarded translations from Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic, giving prominence to elements from their own tradition that made them stand out amongst the lettered communities in the Near East. Instrumental in this process were the word-for-word translation practices of the *Baitul Hikmah*, whose intellectuals dedicated themselves to understanding texts and translating them into Arabic, based on the understood meaning rather than literal translations (Lindberg, 1992, p. 172). For religious scholars, thinkers, and jurists of in the medieval Islamicate, the influx of translation of Greek works presented a challenge of reconciling tensions between human knowledge with revealed knowledge from God (Nuseibeh, 1996).

Classification of Knowledge

The intellectual elite of Sunni orthodoxy classified knowledge into two categories: *‘ulum naqliyya*, the transmitted sciences and *‘ulum ‘aqliyya*, the rational sciences. Transmitted sciences included “Qur’ān; hadith; Qur’ānic sciences, which included exegesis; variant readings

of the text; and hadith sciences” (Afsaruddin, 2005, p. 148), and *usul ul-dīn*, referring to the principles or sources of religion, and jurisprudence, the legal schools of thought, literature, and grammar (Afsaruddin, 2005). Rational sciences usually consisted of seven main components: logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, natural science, and metaphysics (Afsaruddin, 2005). The rational sciences were also considered “foreign” (Afsaruddin, 2005) and those sciences associated with revealed texts were deemed more important, as espoused by thinkers such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and later, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) (Auda, 2008). The spurning of these “foreign” works as opposed to Muslim, i.e. Arab, works created ideas of superiority and would, as a result, impact the emphasis placed on specific sciences. Makdisi (1981) highlights the tripartite division of Ibn Butlan (d. 1075), namely the “Islamic sciences (Qur’ān, hadith, and law), the philosophical and natural sciences (Greek or ancient texts), and the literary sciences (ancillary to the religious sciences—grammar, adab, etc.)” (p.77) as a more accurate classification of the different sciences. These delineations not only served to create a hierarchy amongst the different disciplines, it also constituted the areas of qualifications needed for one to be considered among the learned elite, someone able to derive rules and boundaries for Muslim practice.

With these classifications in mind, by the 11th century scholars wrote widely on the suggested internal configurations for learning institutions, from content to pedagogy, for children and adults alike, within the *kuttāb* (place of writing) and *madrasa* (Cook & Malkawi, 2010). It is interesting to note that many intellectuals came from a law background, either previously acting as judges in government courts or practicing law while teaching. Outside of biographical, historical, and exegesis of texts, genres of literature such as *jāhili* (pre-Islamic)

poetry and stories with accompanying commentaries (Khalidi, 1994) served as a source of reference for teachers in institutions instructing students in both Arabic grammar and the eloquence of the Qurʾān.

A Scholastic Community

Historically, as scholars disinterred knowledge from religious texts, authority was inextricably linked to these same sources. The structure of the Qurʾān itself is not arranged in the chronological order in which it was revealed, but rather in the way it is to be recited. Thus, there is no linear means of ascertaining the nature of the rulings within it. It requires reading the text “from a historical perspective and combined with a linguistic and juridical analysis” (Ramadan, 2017, p. 44), most often authorised to be done by the *ulema*, the scholarly class. “Authority was rooted in a particular text—the Qurʾān—and achieved its full dimensions in an immensely complex tangle of commentaries on the holy book and other secondary texts that radiated outward from it” (Berkey, 2001, p. 70). From these texts, the *ulema* derived their power and influence. They carried out the structured means of transmitting knowledge to students through the formal process of the *ijāza* system. Their ability to transmit knowledge rested on the acquisition of a license, *ijāza*, a transcript of the texts and subjects that the student had studied and the qualifications and/or lineage of the teacher issuing the license (Eickelman, 1978). This license maintained the position of the scholar in society and allowed him to be recognised as a teacher of specific subjects, but even further, it conferred authority, “qualifying its holder to participate in the determinate of orthodoxy doctrine and an intellectual authority qualifying the holder freely to profess original opinions, based on individual, personal research, and to make them public orally as well as in writing” (Makdisi, 1981, p. 10). Through the system of conferring

teaching licenses, knowledge passed from teacher to student through a chain of recognised religious scholars. Memorisation was the defining method of transmitting religious knowledge and scholars who could reproduce knowledge from memory were the most valued (Robinson, 2010). However, "real learning also meant understanding, being able to use critically the materials memorised and apply them to academic problems" (Robinson, 2010, p. 510). The *ulema*, who served as gatekeepers of Islamic learning, constituted one of the pillars of the social order in Islamic lands. In the hands of the *ulema*, scripture and its interpretation became a vehicle of authority and the means to guide the believer on the right path, excluding all others from the communal fold (Hatina, 2006).

Institutions of Learning

Islamic higher learning was mainly informal for the first several centuries of the Islamic empire (from the seventh to the tenth century) but later formalised through the *ijaza* system. Classical acquisition of Islamic knowledge in an academic structure has always been from the teacher directly to the student—a quasi-genealogical chain of authority which descends from master or teacher to a student, to ensure that the knowledge of earlier generations is passed on intact (Eickelman, 1978). The earliest places of knowledge transmission were the homes of the early Muslims, Prophet Muhammad being the first teacher. In the earliest days of Islam, the Prophet taught new Muslims privately in the homes of his companions. As more individuals in Arabia accepted the Prophet's message, his companions built mosques for prayer and learning. As Muslim societies grew due to conversions and conquests (Kadi, 2007) teaching and learning became widespread and occurred in numerous spaces.

The premodern *kuttābs*, beginning in the seventh century, were also among the first places of learning, starting at the first source of knowledge, the Qur'ān. Lessons took place in open areas outside places of worship, on memorisation and recitation of Qur'ān, reading, writings, vocalisation, letters, arithmetic, and some basic religious duties like the rules of ablutions and prayer. *Kuttābs* were funded by wealthy families or other philanthropic giving. The Qur'ān was the only vehicle for formal public instruction for primary-aged children. The *kuttābs* were again not homogenised, specific institutions but were available in private homes, shops, tents, and even in open spaces—though many of them were attached to mosques. Most of the local population was educated by such primary schools during early years of childhood. It was the responsibility of the parent or guardian to see to the child's education of the Qur'ān. Where none existed, it was a public responsibility. In the case of elite families, parents paid for private study for their children, providing them with a higher quality of education, which also included those subjects on offer in *kuttābs*. Such instruction often prepared students for high-level civil service positions. Upon completion of study in the *kuttābs*, and the Qur'ān being committed to memory along with selections of hadith and knowledge of Arabic language, students concentrated on specific disciplines under the tutelage of jurist-scholars often within the *madrasa* colleges.

The *madrasa*, meaning “the place of study”, emerged alongside the mosque in the tenth century. The *madrasa* and the mosque were similar in many areas of study. However, the *madrasa* was created with the sole purpose of being an educational institution. It emerged as a distinct institution, one focused on supporting the transmission of Islamic knowledge, especially *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and established not by governments but by an individual as an act of private charity. The founding of the *madrasa* by Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092) in Baghdad is one of the most

frequent contexts in which Islamic learning is discussed. Nizām al-Mulk’s establishment is said to be the first, in 1067, although some historians argue the institution probably developed earlier in Khurasan in eastern Iran. The *madrasa* became the chief institution of higher education throughout most of the medieval Islamic world and beyond. The development of *madrasas* in the medieval period certainly had a political dimension. Their establishment and functioning were heavily controlled by their patrons, individually and collectively, but the institutions themselves, and the academic activities they supported, were not subjected to systematic governmental regulation and control and in most cases they did not undergird political programmes, although some *madrasa* teachers received gifts of honour from political elites (Kadi, 2007).

The *khānqāhs* were another institution of learning which emerged in Iran in the late tenth or early eleventh century. These Sufi convents—a part of the process whereby Sufism entered the mainstream of Muslim religious experience—were residential settings which served as centres for devotions such as listening to poetry or music, and the performance of *dhikr* (remembrance) of specific Sufi orders. Lastly, the *halaqa* (study circle), and *dār-al-kutub* (library/bookshop) are also locations where teaching and learning took place. It is important to note that while these places were available, the place where one studied was not given primary attention. Instead, who one studied with held more import. Teachers and learning networks were the central elements of the education process.

As Muslim societies formed in other regional areas, the Arabian practice of Islam encountered other cultural practices. Peoples from these different regions provided knowledge in the ways that suited their backgrounds but often modelled institutions, as well as modes of learning, on these classical learning centres. Colonialism further complicated the education

systems in Muslim-majority countries⁴, establishing a new remit which included different languages and various subjects introduced in institutions from early-childhood to higher education (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013), often leading to the presence of two education systems running parallel to one another, what was considered traditional, and the new—the modern.

Interlocutors Out of Bounds

The terrain of preaching in the middle period was far from uniform or limited to the *ulema*, although they were the primary interlocutors. As Cesari (2009) states

...for centuries, the '*ulema*' class enjoyed a monopoly on the interpretation of the Qur'ān and hadith. The '*ulema*' were creators and guardians of Islamic orthodoxy by means of a huge body of *muftīs* (Islamic scholars who issue religious rulings, fatwas), *qāḍīs* (judges), and other religious agents, such as teachers or guardians of *waqfs* (religious endowments) (p. 152).

The work of the *ulema* contributed to the development of written culture; however, the vital role of orality persisted, and competing forms of authoritative teaching and preaching emerged.

While the *ulema* held study circles in mosques and *madrasa* institutions, the *khaṭīb* (deliverer of the Friday sermon) was a staple role of a type of preaching conducted in medieval Muslim society. Delivered in a mosque, “sermons followed fairly rigorous conventions regarding form and content—formulaic praise of God, prayers for Muhammad and his community, recitation of Qur'ānic passages, and short admonitions to pious behaviour” (Berkey, 2001, p. 12). There was also non-canonical hortatory preaching (Jones, 2012) of the *wā'iz* (the warner), who “had the responsibility of inspiring pious fear in his listeners and telling them stories of the early heroes of the Islamic faith” (Berkey, 2001, p. 13). Additionally, there was the homiletic

⁴ See Kadi, 2007 for a concise survey

storytelling of the *qāss* (the storyteller) who would “sit or stand in the streets, reciting from memory, passages from the Qur’ān, hadith, and stories of the early Muslims an encouraging his audience to pray, fast, and fulfil their other...obligations” (Berkey, 2001, p. 13). However, the line between them was quite blurred. Summarily, Berkey (2001) identifies three characteristics of the tradition of popular preaching in the Islamic middle period: (1) storytelling, “in particular those of the pre-Islamic prophets, the *qisas al anbiya* (stories of the prophets) and of the pious early Muslims—formed the stock-in-trade of many popular preachers...” (p.19); (2) tensions between preaching and storytelling with the structured process for the transmission of religious knowledge, revolving around: subject matter; criteria for the legitimacy of information and personal authority; and (3) linkages between preaching, storytelling, and Sufism.

Jones (2012) contends with the idea of “eloquent speech” historically, exploring the conditions under which the “quasi-magical efficacy of pre-modern Islamic oratory” (p. 6) could take hold. Jones’s (2012) analysis of homiletic literature, literary works and juridical sources from Iberia and the Maghreb area during the middle period illustrate the ways oratory was used for the “perpetuation and cultivation of religious ideas, political ideologies, moral dispositions, symbolic systems—in sum, the transmission of culture” (p. 7). Orators understood that influence was acquired through the skilful use of “rhetorical techniques and authoritative religious discourses that appealed to their intended audiences emotionally, aesthetically, as well as rationally” (p .8). Jones (2012) states:

They recited from scripture and other authoritative sources. They personified the founding heroes in their performances on the pulpit. They narrated tales of exemplary mythic figures. They warned of an eschatological future of eternal salvation or damnation. But mythic narratives of past ancestors and events, like eschatological and apocalyptic myths of the future, are always invoked for

purposes of the present. However stereotyped these orations may appear to modern readers, when read carefully and contextualized properly, they reveal the processes by which orators continuously reshaped and applied paradigmatic mythic narratives into the spheres of culture, society, and politics (p. 8).

Similarly, Hirschkind's (2012) research on the effect of sermons in contemporary Egypt notes that an emotive sermon

brings those who listen to it close to God by instilling in them such ethical and devotional dispositions as humility (*khushu*), regret (*nadm*), fear (khawf or *taqwa*), hope (*raja*), states of the heart that within Islamic ethical traditions may lead one to the experience of pious tranquility (*itminan*) and a stillness of the soul (*sakina*) (p. 6).

The confluence of orators in the arena of knowledge transmission gave rise to debates on what was considered legitimate transmission of religious knowledge, more so from the *ulema*, critiquing the content of material used and manner of transmission by anyone other than the learned elite. Such a historical accounting conveys the role of personalities, other than the religious elite or scholars, in influencing the laity. It highlights the importance of text and their narrative recounting along with pious tales as the Muslim mode of recalling the past (Sizgorich, 2004).

Religious authority was thus constructed based on the possession of knowledge of the Arabic language and a command of interpreting religious law and jurisprudence using authoritative sources (Qur'an and hadith), mediated by a teacher on a chain of existing authority (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Therefore, those in possession of such legitimacy maintained a monopoly over the religious discourse and the ability to interpret religious texts for lay consumption. This legitimacy was constructed, defended, and maintained through the *madrasa* institutions and later reconfigured with colonisation in the Muslim world (Zaman,

2002). However, with the expansion of the Islamic empire to other regions, new ways of practice developed as Islam mixed with various cultures, reshaping traditional understandings of belief and practice, as well as widening the location from which religious scholars originated.

Religious Authority

Religious authority can be understood as a source of mastery and knowledge about God which can provide guidance on how those of faith should behave in their lives. Cochran (1977) states that indeed, one needs a community in order to have authority. This community seeks a perceived sense of truth which is sought through a tradition of knowledge. It is the embodiment of these elements by a community that offers consensual power, which is practically materialised through a presentation of leadership in some form. Cesari (2004) endorses this opinion, stating:

To truly achieve the status of "religious authority" in Islam, one must be acknowledged as such in various sociological milieus and by different age groups; this usually requires a method of communication that goes through either transnational networks, political institutions, or local community structures (p. 115).

What may have traditionally been seen to bind together the Muslim intellectual community in previous centuries was an agreement on the foundational standards of education and an attachment to a common set of rules of engagement, with individuals qualified to enter discussions based on their intellectual training and educational histories. However, the unity and distinctive characteristics of an intellectual class have become obfuscated over time. Still, I offer a reminder here that the sphere of knowledge production and transmission during the height of Islamic intellectualism was not composed of a cogent body of individuals with concretely defined characteristics. Nonetheless, in the present day, the continued use of the term "crisis of

authority” signals a perceived departure from an agreed-upon foundation. El Fadl (2005) attributes this crisis to the destruction of the legal system and learning institutions which defined the importance of the scholar, leading to an interpretative vacuum, for anyone to interpret. This resulted in the development of authoritarians, who attempt to stave off heterogeneity. However, Zaman (2002) asserts that no such vacuum exists, and rather that we can perceive a shift in religious authority, given the pervasiveness of media technologies. Zaman’s reference to technology demonstrates a need for us to cast our eye onto online spaces.

Lewis (2004) states that present day, religious teachers neglect traditional training or secular studies. This conflicts with Cesari (2009), who notes that in the West the “vast majority of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are no longer members of the trained *ulema* but rather graduates of secular universities” (p. 154).

Furthermore, she argues that “[e]stablished religious figures like the shaykhs of Al-Azhar or Medina and other established imams are therefore increasingly supplanted by the engineer, secular scholar, student, businessman, and autodidact who mobilise the masses and speak for Islam” (Cesari, 2009, p. 154). The ethnographic chapters will reveal that the complexities regarding the characterisations of religious authorities, and their functions in different spaces, are an amalgamation of these assertions.

Nonetheless this transnationalism, as well as the pervasiveness of technological tools, shows that fragmentation is as much a characteristic of contemporary times (Cesari, 2004; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Mandaville, 1998; Robinson, 2009; Zaman, 2002) as it was in Medieval times, as “more and more groups and individuals are claiming the right to speak on

Islam and in the name of Islam” (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006, p. 12). While this prevents the use of accurate titles for these teachers, it does not discount their ability to influence individuals.

Researchers often refer to religious authorities in terms of their functional roles in their communities or larger society. Cesari (2004) identifies four types of religious authorities in Western contexts: (1) the bureaucratic leader, who works on behalf of institutions originating from the Muslim countries; (2) the community or “parochial” leader, whose activity is concentrated in the mosque or Islamic association of a particular neighbourhood or city; (3) the globalised leader, whose activities are focused on transnational Islamic movements, whether they be Salafi groups or Sufi brotherhoods; and, lastly, (4) the preacher or public speaker. van Bruinessen and Allievi (2011) use the following categories of leadership for Western European Muslim communities: (1) traditionally trained scholars who are either from Muslim-majority countries or scholars who are trained in the Islamic tradition and are “native” to the environment; (2) Imams who operate within the confines of the mosques and local community; (3) Muslim intellectuals and activists who advocate for engagement at home and/or abroad; and (4) autodidacts who are Muslim professionals with knowledge of Islam acquired from their own personal study. While the commonalities between these groupings are discernible and useful in illustrating the myriad roles and titles associated with those who reproduce knowledge, they are difficult to transpose on other regional contexts or even to fully understand how religious authority operates within Western Muslim communities. Given the presence of multiple centres of knowledge production in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority communities, and the various ways in which these communities have organised themselves within their societies, the characteristics of one role may be complex. Thus there is no one role that leaders, teachers or

preachers inhabit. The mosque leader might lead the prayer, perform marriages, be a part of an Islamic movement, and be a popular public preacher. Furthermore, these categorisations limit the discussion to religious authority as it functions offline, while literature continues to develop alongside these discussions about the use of new forms of media.

Campbell's (2007) thematic analysis of religious engagement online in relation to religious authority, as experienced by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim adherents, is one such development. She suggests that researchers explore "multiple layers of authority" when researching religious authority online. Employing the use of a framework that considers online spaces is imperative given the impact of new technologies, starting from the creation of the printing press. In confirming that religious authority differs from the general concept of authority, in that it is based on a process of legitimisation linked to a divine source, Campbell (2007) defines four layers of religious authority:

religious hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognised religious or community leaders), religious structures (community structures, patterns of practice, or official organisations), religious ideology (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity) or religious texts (recognised teachings or official religious books such as the Koran, Torah, or Bible). (p. 1048)

Using this approach, Campbell follows Weber's classifications of authority by focusing on "the means through which authority is conveyed rather than on the end result of such authority" (p. 1046). As becomes evident in the chapters to follow, this approach brings to light the different forms of authority contribute to the legitimising forms of religious authority.

[Impact of Media and Technology](#)

Traditionally, students had to master Arabic, and often Persian, to unlock the “secrets” of the texts. Students took lessons on tablets, went home and erased them and came back the next day for the next lesson after they had them memorised. As parchment came into existence and continued the process of recording information, it wasn’t until late in the nineteenth century, between 1870-1890, that the Ottoman elite was transformed by book knowledge, some 400 years after Christendom (Robinson, 2009). The technological age of the time ushered in printed copies of the Qur’ān. This dramatically changed the landscape of religious authority. As Robinson (2000) states:

While print enabled *ulema* greatly to extend their influence in public affairs, it was also doing serious damage to the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics, and the print run for a major text could be as many as ten thousand copies, and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read to make up for the absence of the author in the text; their precious *ijāzas*, which brought the authority of the past to their learning in the present, were made less significant; their monopoly of the transmission of knowledge was broken. (p. 80)

These same claims are made today regarding the delegitimising of knowledge and technology undermining the authority of the *ulema*. Yet still, the *ulema* adopted this means of transmission and used print and modern technologies to maintain their religious authority in the face of competing voices. The proliferation of pamphlets, cassettes, VHS tapes, and CDs circulated widely across the world.

The Internet has created unique spaces due to its lack of hierarchy and fluidity of communication (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Bunt (2009) uses the term Cyber-Islamic Environments to refer to Muslim worldviews and the specific forms of online or digital ‘Islam’ that are distinct from the offline representations that are represented within the House of Islam.

However, no empirical research substantiates this claim of distinction between offline and online practice exists. If anything, research suggests that religious teachers use technologies to leverage their authority. Nonetheless, new media have created a “market” for religious education (Roy, 2010) and are increasingly being used to act as standalone pedagogical sites.

Advancements in technology have broken down walls of authority that rooted the acquisition of knowledge in the Muslim-majority world and created new “Islamic” domains of thought related to Muslim-minority and majority societies. This does not explicitly imply that the market is now “democratised” and reflects the diversity of Islamic opinions. This has always been the case within the history of Sunni Islamic thought, given the lack of any central religious authority (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003), unlike the more formal structures in Shi’i thought, which are associated with the lineage of Prophet Muhammad. This does not, however, imply that access to diverse opinions has increased, given that religious scholars compete with one another and debates around authority intensify (Robinson, 2009; Zaman, 2002). In this sense, the Internet has the same effect on the field of religious scholarship as print once did, in that it does not “totally undermine the authority of the *‘ulema’* [religious scholar]; [as] they were able to use print to bolster their authority while others came forward to rival them” (Robinson, 2009, p. 350). An available range of interlocutors promote a relativism of beliefs and values even within the religious context. Thus, charismatic religious teachers and preachers have embodied the entrepreneurial spirit of the age, using media technology from the outset to define the boundaries of Islam tradition.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the historical role of religious knowledge in Arabo-Islamic learning communities, and the ways in which scholastic communities at the height of Islamic intellectualism transmitted knowledge and how and where students learned. Despite the presence of various institutions, it was teachers, not institutions, who conferred authority to their students to teach on their own. This established the presence of a learned elite responsible for determining the confines of Islamic law. However, the presence and popularity of preachers with less formal study demonstrates challenges to the dominant forms of religious authority of the learned elite. As such, voices speaking to the laity were far from monolithic. Historical analysis reveals the presence of multiple categories of preachers who engaged with the public around religious knowledge.

In contemporary Western Muslim societies, like previous Muslim societies, the roles and configurations of religious authorities are diverse and are further complicated by media and technology. However, Western Muslims experience their own set of challenges living in pluralistic societies, unlike during the classical period where Arabic was the lingua franca and Islam was the majority religious expression. Religious teachers and preachers contend with transmitting knowledge in a minority context whilst maintaining their authority to do so amidst competing other voices in the public domain—offline and online. In the chapters that follow, I begin to explore how teachers and students negotiate these challenges.

CHAPTER 2: THE CHALLENGE OF TRADITION IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

In this chapter, I use the historical examination from Chapter 1 as a backdrop to discuss the various pedagogical spaces that make up the contemporary American Muslim education ecology in which religious teachers operate. I describe the history of indigenous and immigrant Muslim communities and the different institutions of learning—some of which have infused religious inflections into national educational institutions, whilst others have remodelled educational institutions from Muslim-majority contexts and seized upon the entrepreneurial spirit of the time by creating new types of learning environments.

These pedagogical spaces are offline and online, providing students with learning opportunities on several media platforms. This also enables teachers to continue to develop and maintain their religious authority and compete with other voices speaking on behalf of Islam. This shows the plurality of bodies of knowledge, actors, interpretations and institutions that contribute to the development of diverse expressions of an American Muslim tradition. Whilst a range of Islamic educational sites exist in the United States, my focus in the chapters that follow is on a range of intensive learning environments which centre the discursive work of developing an American Muslim tradition.

Shifting Demographics

According to recent studies (Pew, 2011), there are between 2.6 and 7 million Muslims in the United States. “30% describe themselves as white, 23% as black, 21% as Asian, 6% as Hispanic and 19% as other or mixed race, whilst native-born Muslim population have a higher proportion of blacks (40%), and lower proportions of whites (18%) and Asians (10%), than the

foreign-born population”—though it should be noted that there are a fair number of inconsistencies in data that presents the number of American Muslims. Furthermore,

two-thirds of the Muslims in the U.S. today (64.5%) are first-generation immigrants (foreign-born), while slightly more than a third (35.5%) were born in the U.S. By 2030, however, more than four-in-ten of the Muslims in the U.S. (44.9%) are expected to be native-born. (Pew, 2011).

As youth populations continue to grow up in America and begin to raise children who identify only as American, the shifts in the generational population require attentiveness to the nuance in the bifurcation of indigenous and immigrant American Muslims.

The social landscape of the developing United States experienced sweeping changes after Reconstruction, and as immigration laws were amended. To prevent low-skilled individuals from immigrating, the government passed a legislative act in 1917 requiring immigrants to pass a literacy test. In further attempts to decrease the flow of immigrants, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, establishing a quota system. This system restricted entry to two percent of the total number of people of a nationality in the country as of the 1890 census. In effect, this privileged immigrants from Western Europe and prohibited immigration from Asia, and yet

quotas did not apply to visitors, foreign students, immediate family members of U.S. citizens, and the members of certain professions, such as professors and religious workers. Congress also passed legislation between 1924 and 1965 that tweaked the criteria that distinguished “quota immigrants” from “non-quota immigrants”. (GhaneaBassiri, 2010, p. 293)

But in 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act abolished the quota system and gave preference to refugees, family members of U.S. citizens or permanent residents, and highly educated professionals or workers in fields that experienced labour shortages (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). As a result, there was

an influx of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, with just over 800,000 people arriving from South Asia alone between 1965 and 1990 (Curtis, 2008).

The Nation of Islam

As the immigration laws continued to change, the nation remained mired in social discord and dissent, given the legality of racial segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans from society. In 1930, Wallace D. Farad Muhammad established the Nation of Islam (NOI) to provide structured resistance to the government, at the same time giving value to the black body. The NOI believed that “the black self was defined not by African Americans’ experiences in America, which were dehumanising, but rather by their inherent divine nature, which they believed white America had stolen from them through slavery and Jim Crow” (GhanneaBissiri, 2010, p.231). Malcolm X was a key figure in this movement, from his conversion to Islam in 1946 until his extrication from the NOI in 1964. A self-educated and charismatic speaker, Malcolm X rallied African Americans to remain in opposition of the state and the hegemony of white supremacy, whilst advocating for education and discipline of black Muslims. The segmented, though overlapping conditions under which African Americans lived, is what Nuruddin (2000) characterises as the “triple heritage” of American Muslims (Africanity or traditional indigenous culture; Islamic culture; Western culture—continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora). Jackson (2005) uses the word “indigenous” to refer to black American Muslims in relation to immigrant communities. Nonetheless the indigenous communities, in contrast to early immigrant communities, lived Islam through the history of their peoples, and their music, mode of dress, and education, identifying fully as American and Muslim, unlike their immigrant counterparts.

By the 1960s the NOI began developing connections with Muslim-majority countries, moving away from its stance of exclusion and deepening international relationships steered by Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, Warith Deen Muhammad took control of the NOI and moved the organisation more in line with "Al-Islam," orthodox Sunni practice. He gave primacy to the five pillars of Islam by encouraging "followers to practice the daily prayers, to make the hajj to Mecca, and to fast during Ramadan" (Curtis, 2008, p. 109). He renamed the organisation several times, the American Muslim Society being its final title, and initiated the inclusion of American flags into movement temples (mosques), explicitly establishing American patriotism. This was seen to be in opposition to the teachings of his father, which had called for a degree of separatism within American society, given black disenfranchisement. Against the backdrop of this indigenous African-American Muslim narrative and nascent immigrant communities, post-1965, a distinct divide was drawn between the two communities in relation to what was legitimate Islamic practice; this can be characterised as a move from Black Religion to Post Colonial Religion (Jackson, 2005).

New Immigrant Communities

As previously mentioned, the immigrant landscape underwent several changes after 1965. The effects ushered in a wave of Muslim immigrants from Asia and the Middle East. These immigrants most often possessed high degrees of education and professional skills and mixed with existing populations of African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims from Arab countries, arriving over four waves of immigration as identified by Haddad (2002). The Muslim immigrant community fractured, akin to the fissure seen in African-American Muslim

communities dealing with issues of race in America and Du Bois's (1994) notion of "double consciousness". As Mattson (2003) explains,

In order to understand their role in America, Muslims need to define not only Islam but also America. Muslims need to place America in its proper theological and legal category so they can determine what kind of relationship is possible and desirable for them to have with this country. (p. 199)

Similarly, Ramadan (2004) states that immigrants were unclear if they wanted to be

...Muslims in the West or rather Pakistani, Turkish and Arab Muslims in the West, and, as for native European and American converts, they were divided between exiling themselves from their own culture by "Arabizing" or "Pakistanizing" themselves and simply saying that they were at a distance from Muslim communities that had come from elsewhere and were culturally distinct. (p. 79)

Religious authorities wrestled with the idea of how to categorise this new non-Muslim land, as this description would be the basis for interpretation of how to live faithfully within a culture which was largely non-Muslim. Religious leaders initially adopted a binary view of the world as *dar-ul-Islam* (land of Islam) and *dar-ul-harb* (land of war), (Khalidi, 2004) which had existed from the historical conquests of the Ottoman empire until its 1924 collapse in Turkey. A proliferation of Muslim organisations such as the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Council of North America, and politically (with Islam "back home") motivated groups such as *Hizb at Tahrir* (Liberation Party) and *Ikhwan al Muslimeen* (Muslim Brotherhood) took shape to attend to this dilemma. Many descriptive heuristic solutions were developed: *dar-ul-kufr* (land of disbelievers), *dar-ul-amn* (land of order) *dar-ul-ahd* or *dar-ul sulh* (land of alliance or treaty), *dar-ul-da'wah* (land of calling) (Khalidi, 2004), and the most recent, *dar-ul-shahadah* (land of witness) (Ramadan, 2004), where Muslims are encouraged to be faithful and civically engaged in their communities. However, these discussions dismissed the presence of African-American Muslim practice, seeing them as alien to "traditional" Islam—read non-black Islam—given the NOI's

vehement focus on the racism against blacks. Therefore black identity was challenged by immigrant Muslims, as they claimed that expressions and interpretations of Islam outside of the “Muslim world” were inferior. This had larger implications, as Muslims exhibit an “objectification” mindset (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996), which is characterised by questions that “come to the fore in the consciousness of large numbers of believers: ‘What is my religion?’ ‘Why is it important to my life?’ and ‘How do my beliefs guide my conduct?’” (p. 38). This meant that answers for these questions were only authentic if they came from Muslim-majority regions.

Subsequently, American Muslim communities grew along ethnic lines despite the commonality of the religion and acceptance of the *umma* concept, which inherently disregards ethnic and racial differences. As Curtis (2008) affirms, “American Muslims, like American Christians, remained divided by both class and race, living in segregated neighbourhoods, attending segregated schools, and marrying persons of the same racial and class group” (p. 105). The varied societal imperatives in the United States and the social needs of the different communities contributed to the ways in which they engaged with religious leaders, teachers, preachers, or intellectuals, and developed educational institutions to advance specific American Muslim identities.

[Mapping Sources of Muslim Education in the United States](#)

It should not be assumed that all American Muslim parents or young adults make a concerted effort to begin and/or continue learning about Islam or develop certain types of Muslim identities. Allievi’s (2011) tripartite categorisation of European Muslims who seek knowledge is useful to bring to bear on other Western Muslim communities. The first group is

made up of those who desire integration into society and to exist seamlessly within mainstream society. Allievi (2011) asserts that this disposition is exemplified by a diminishing of traditional religious practice. Muslims with this aim have no concern with the search for, or production and transmission of religious knowledge. The second group, according to Allievi (2011), is also disinterested in new knowledge due to the presence of traditional beliefs, which they consider perfect Islam. This group of Muslims are often ghettoised and model their communities on the memory of how things were “back home”. It is this group that is often characterised as “conservative” or “traditional” and receives much media attention, given its desire to remain distant from society, which causes alarm and concern about what goes on within its communities. The third group consists of Muslims who actively seek knowledge and methods to interpret and produce new knowledge facilitated by modern religious scholars—who understand the tradition and the Western context—attempting to integrate but retain their religious identity. As knowledge seekers, it is argued that this third group interacts with the dissemination of knowledge and its production in two ways.

Van Bruinessen (2011) argues that the religious market operates within a supply/demand model, whereby Islamic knowledge is marketed by a variety of individuals, movements, and/or associations. The Muslim public acts as consumer and chooses its knowledge sources based on what is on offer. The second model is that of individualisation, which is regarded as a less passive approach. Within this group, young Muslims break away from the cultural norms that their parents have associated with Islam and embark on creating their own forms of Islamic knowledge. These categorisations are primarily situated amongst discourses referring to immigrant communities in the West and their impact on integration in Europe. However, they

may not easily operate when discussing American Muslim communities, given the presence of indigenous communities—African American communities which did not go through an integration process as described in relation to immigrant communities. However, the categories are useful in providing a background to understand how Muslims learn their religion in a minority context.

In many Muslim-majority countries, a central body under the auspices of the government determines the boundaries of Islamic learning, setting the framework for informal and formal educational settings from early-childhood to higher education. In contradistinction, Muslim-minority countries organise learning environments without governmental involvement, though the extent to which this autonomy exists, varies from country to country. In the case of the United States, ordinary citizens and private organisations educate Muslim communities in formal, informal, settings – offline and online, as they see fit given their first amendment rights to establish and exercise their religious beliefs. As a result, the religious education of American Muslims occurs in a variety of spaces and is mediated by religious intellectuals, teachers, preachers, activists and other interlocutors of religious texts, whose engagement with politics and the government administration varies.

K-12 Institutions and Spaces

Private Schools

The effects of the socio-political climate during Jim Crow and the civil rights movement influenced the education system, wherein blacks and whites were prohibited from mixing. This caused black children to experience inferior education. Although desegregation in public schools forbade restrictions based on race eventually, black students were demeaned because of their

skin colour. Education was key to the social transformation goals of the NOI. The University of Islam was established in 1932 with a remit at the K-12 level, not at that of higher education, to re-educate African Americans. The NOI positioned schools as vehicles of empowerment to re-instil morale and dispel feelings of inferiority (Memon, 2011). As evidenced by the then leader of the NOI, Muhammad (1965):

They want to school our children. They want them to go to their public schools. We know that the kindergarten children and first graders once in Islam cannot be taken into Christian schools without having to suffer mockery and attack from the Christian children and from the Christian teachers who hate Islam, the God of Islam, and the Prophets of Islam. Therefore, we believe that to keep peace with the Christians, we must teach our children in their own schools... (p. 214)

As Memon (2009) illustrates in his oral history research on Muslim education in North America, the NOI moved from an initial protest disposition to one of preservation and then praxis. As a result, NOI Clara Muhammad schools underwent change after the death of Elijah Muhammad, transitioning into environments that aimed to preserve the Muslim identity of African Americans (Memon, 2009) and join them with their immigrant brethren. In immigrant communities, preservation manifested itself in the creation of local institutions, mosques, and schools, which aimed to protect children from the ills of American society and preserve home cultures (Memon, 2009), yet also enabling them to translate high educational achievement to high socioeconomic status (Memon, 2009). During the 1990s, there was a push to challenge the assumption of the appropriateness of the American school system and a call to Islamise the curricula within schools (Memon, 2009), which was a part of a larger call for the “Islamisation of Knowledge”—an Islamic approach to teaching all subjects, from other American Muslim organisations. However, after 9/11, “holistic Islamic instruction increasingly became synonymous with integrating a character

curriculum based on Islamic values” (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013, p. 251). Post-9/11 pedagogy moved toward outward practice, switching focus from knowledge *about* Islam to the question of *how* to be Muslim (Memon, 2009). Today, many of the teaching methods and established curricula in faith-based schools resemble those in the public-school system. Thus, the “Islamic” component, according to Grewal and Coolidge (2013) is “simply that Islamic studies and sometimes Arabic are additional courses and that the Muslim-majority school environment creates an Islamic ethos that normalises Islamic practices and cultivates pride and a strong ‘Muslim-first’ identity in students” (p. 251).

Islamic Schools

There are 30,861 private schools based on the most recent statistical data collected by the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2011. Most of these schools (80%) are of a specific religious denomination. However, the “percentage of Muslim children in private Islamic schools is roughly two to three times less than in the general public” (Haddad, Senzai, & Smith, 2009, p. 35). Statistics reveal there are 229 Islamic schools with over 32,000 students and close to 4,000 full-time teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This number reflects schools that are registered with the Islamic School League of America, whose mission is to facilitate the needs of Islamic schools in the United States. Self-reporting limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about the collected data.

Charter Schools

Independently operated public schools, started by anyone— from a group of parents to a non-profit organisation—are another type of education institution for American Muslims.

Religious charter schools, as they are informally called in faith communities, offer faith-based and culturally relevant education to students. However, these schools receive public funds to operate, and therefore perform a delicate balancing act between the separation of church and state of the First Amendment. There are no statistics on the number of Muslim charter schools in the United States. Many schools have come under fire, given the popularity of Gülen schools set up by followers of Fethullah Gülen. Gülen, an exiled Turkish-born theologian, established the *Hizmet* (service) organisation, dedicated towards the common good of society. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accused Gülen of being behind the July 2016 coup attempt.

Home-schooling

The home is often the first place where children learn about Islam, depending on the level and type of practice of their parents. Parents teach moral character, ritual practices, the Arabic alphabet, and memorisation of the Qur'ān. Attention is often paid to what is *halal* (permitted) and *haram* (prohibited), particularly as this relates to drinking, food choices, and pre-marital sex. Parents without the time or ability to do this teaching, but who have the means, may pay for a teacher to come to the home to teach the children Qur'ān and basic Islamic habits. Private homes also provide spaces for study circles, which can be conducted by a well-known teacher or simply discussions amongst peers.

Relatedly, there are an estimated 1.7 million children formally home-schooled in the United States. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Statistics reveal that most parents chose to home-school their children given “[a] concern about environment of other schools.” The second most cited reason was to instil moral or religious instruction. Given the power that individual states hold over their education structure, the subjects that parents cover vary from state to

state. Many Muslim parents elect to home-school their children, teaching them subjects like math, science, and history alongside religious studies, or having added an Islamic inflection to these subjects. For example, as students learn about the earth and all that inhabits it, they are encouraged to reflect on God being the divine and provider of all their provisions. Parents often participate in local or online home-schooling networks, whether denominational or not.

Alongside the curriculum, home-schooling allows parents to instil moral and ethical values to students and protect them from social ills such as drugs, sex, or bullying. Recognising that it is their responsibility to instil religious values in their children, home-schooling parents see that this can only be achieved by establishing “an environment that fosters God-consciousness, not through the social and educational environments of public school settings” (Martinez, 2009, p.110).

Madrasas

A long-standing tradition in Muslim-majority countries, the *madrasa* is a component of the American Muslim education landscape. Many of the *madrasas* in the United States originate from the Deobandi movement in India and as a result, they are most often ethnically South Asian. However, they also attract parents from other racial or ethnic groups who seek an environment where their children can learn Islam in a setting without social distractions. Residential in nature, much like American boarding schools, the *madrasa* segregated students by gender, and these students take classes in the Islamic sciences, including Arabic language and Urdu as well, in some cases. Memorisation of the Qur’ān is a key feature of the curriculum. In addition to their instruction on Islam, students study necessary secular subjects in order obtain a General Education Degree (GED) (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). *Madrasas* also cater to older

students who are interested in higher education in Islamic studies. These *‘ālim/‘ālima* programmes offer courses that will lead to a degree at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and sometimes doctoral level. It should be noted that these courses are unaccredited and thus do not have much market value outside of Muslim communities. However, with degrees such as these, it is possible for graduates to find work in local mosques, Islamic schools, or other community organisations.

Emerging Adult Education

The Mosque

The mosque is the most significant social institution in Muslim communities. It is here that the five daily prayers are performed, the Friday prayer service is conducted, and small study circles are held, as well as one-off lectures during evenings and weekends. Many mosques also hold weekend Islamic schools as supplementary education for children both in and outside of public schools. Students often age out of them as they leave high school. Many mosques also have established *hifdh* (Qur’ānic memorisation) programmes. The structure of these programmes varies, with some held after school times for children in formal schools, and others during the day for children who are solely memorising alongside home-schooling. In recent years, a number of mosques have morphed into community centres, offering these activities but also providing a space for the youth to gather by creating gymnasiums, cafes, and meeting spaces for events and for families to congregate.

Higher Education

After graduating from high school, whether from an Islamic school or public school, young Muslims have few options for Muslim higher education. Prior to two years ago, there were no U.S.-based options from which to choose. The ability to build and sustain Muslim institutions relies on the ability to speak to the concerns of American Muslims and attract a student body. Students go to secular or Christian colleges or universities. This is unsurprising, given that young adults seek degrees that will garner professional employment. Interest in Islam could be perused through a degree in Islamic Studies, although it would be non-confessional. Otherwise, students can apply to educational institutions in the Muslim-majority world, such as al-Azhar in Cairo, the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia, or the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Currently, there are two faith-based institutions available for higher education in the United States.

The American Islamic College (AIC), established in 1981 in Chicago, Illinois, was the first Muslim higher education institution in the United States aimed at providing an educational framework that was both Western and Islamic. AIC began offering classes towards a B.A. in Islamic Studies or Arabic, with funding from the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Muslim World League, in 1983 (Schmidt, 2004). However, it never achieved state accreditation and classes were discontinued in the early 1990s. AIC reopened in 2010 with a new operating authority, offering B.A. and M.A. degrees in Islamic Studies and a Master of Divinity degree in Islamic Studies. It aims to provide students with a liberal arts education and a foundation in Islamic Studies. The educational philosophy is “committed to promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding, responsible world citizenship, and engaged social service” (AIC website,

n.d.). Courses include Islamic subjects such as Qur'ānic and hadith studies, Islamic legal theory, classical Islamic theology and philosophy, Islamic spirituality, as well as courses in social sciences.

With accreditation rights granted by the North Central Association for Colleges and Schools in 1983, East-West University's (EWU) vision of cross-cultural dialogue was clear from the start despite its religious roots. Any religious messaging was subtle in university documents, and advertisements to potential students were neutral, using terms such as "individual development," "diversity in knowledge and culture," and "academic success" (Schmidt, 2004). However, its philosophy states that "[t]he University is established primarily to preserve and extend and to integrate and transmit knowledge of human being concerning themselves, the universe, and their Creator" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 89). AIC and EWU shared similar funding sources, not to mention the personal friendship of the founders of each institution. The university differed from other institutions that offered Islam as a subject of study as it used Islam as the standard by which all disciplines should be understood, rather than studying Islam as a social and historical phenomenon (Schmidt, 2004). This manifested itself in belief in Islam being requisite to be a teacher of Islamic studies, and courses related to the Islamic studies were given higher priority (Schmidt, 2004). However, facing competition from other local universities and without strong support from Muslim communities, EWU lessened its focus on Islamic sciences. Today, it is relatively impossible to discern its Islamic roots from the college's website or the information online about its founder. EWC identifies as a non-denominational college which aims to provide affordable higher education to local and international students. The college has been able to sustain its operation and maintain its accreditation, but as of June 2015, it remains on probation by the awarding accreditation body.

Zaytuna College is the latest instalment in the higher education arena. Beginning in 1996 as an institute in Hayward, California, it delivered informal educational programming. Named after Jami`a al-Zaytūna, the famed mosque in Tunisia which served as one of the primary centres of learning in North Africa, the institute offered short courses, lectures, and online learning. One of its founders, Hamza Yusuf, highlights a gap in the provisions for Muslim education in America, as the rationale behind its inception.

Part of our struggle is the fact that we do not have any more institutions that are producing human beings of a brilliant intellectual calibre and a spiritual depth that can not only diagnose but also treat the patient. And traditionally this has been the realm of the *'ulema' al amilun*, who are called the *awliyâ*, the people who are close to God, in their knowledge and in their action. And those people traditionally guided the Muslims through their devastating periods and times. (H. Yusuf, Ex-Christian Converts to Islam [Video], 27 February 1997)

The institute launched a pilot seminary programme in 2004, graduating five students in 2008, to address the lack of cultural knowledge amongst religious leaders tending to the spiritual and pastoral needs of American Muslims. In 2009, the institute transformed into a Muslim liberal arts college, graduating its first class in 2014 and receiving state accreditation the following year. The vision of Zaytuna's Muslim liberal arts model is "focused by the trivium—grammar, rhetoric and logic—sharpened by courses in American and Muslim law, Islamic and comparative theology, philosophy, politics, economics, history and ethics," (Zaytuna website, n.d.). Drawing from the "great books" focus of Robert Maynard Hutchins's educational theory, Zaytuna's curriculum is built upon a list of "giants who have laid the intellectual and spiritual foundation" for future work. In the same way in which many Western universities have developed their degree programmes on a specific Western canon—often criticised for the dominance of white men from

the global north—so too has the Zaytuna curriculum been devised from a canon considered to be the best of Islamic intellectual tradition.

Many of the early higher education institutions in the United States were developed to train Christians to go into ministry. As secularisation and ideas from the Enlightenment took hold, many colleges and universities transitioned away from a Christian mission, focusing solely on the liberal arts, while other confessional institutions still combined the two. Zaytuna grounds itself in Islamic tradition and values and sees their remit as preparing students to be “healthy human being[s]” (Zaytuna, n.d.) and “global citizens and visionary leaders” (AIC, n.d.) and not necessarily preparing them for religious vocation.

The Muslim Students’ Association

The Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) is also one of the largest functioning networks of informal learning spaces on college campuses in the United States. In 1963, Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia established the association, now formally identified as MSA National, with early funding from the Muslim World League. Its initial members were students from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as well as the Jamaat-e-Islami group in Pakistan, who immigrated to the United States and were studying in universities and colleges across the country. The goal of the organisation was to promote an Islamic identity and facilitate the maintenance of an Islamic lifestyle for students on university campuses. The first chapter opened in the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and now chapters exist in many universities and colleges across the United States and Canada (Schmidt, 2004). As a student-run organisation, the MSA holds activities to attend to the religious needs by obtaining a university space to practice daily prayers and the Friday prayer, in addition to providing small study circles on various

religious topics, and bigger lectures given by invited popular Muslim religious teachers. The MSA also mediates relationships with the larger student body, establishing programmes such as Islamic Awareness Week, Hijabi-for-a-Day, and Fast-a-thon, to answer questions by non-Muslims about Islam and to normalise relationships between different groups on campus. Although completely innocuous, after 9/11 MSAs came under harsh scrutiny from government and local law enforcement and faced accusations of radicalisation. In 2011, the Associated Press revealed that the New York Police Department (NYPD) had been conducting surveillance on campuses along the country's north-east coast as early as 2006 (Shamas & Arastu, 2011). Names of prominent religious teachers such as Nouman Ali Khan, Tariq Ramadan, Zaid Shakir, and Hamza Yusuf are mentioned in one leaked secret report.

Educational Organisations

Although parents attend to children's religious education during early childhood, it is often institutions, formal or informal, that do most of the heavy lifting in building educational programming for youth. Outside of mosque activities and home study circles, youngsters attend programmes held by a variety of educational organisations. Khan (2009) states that "[t]hese institutions are part of an intense marketing campaign, attempting to sell their religious perspective to their young and impressionable clientele. Inevitably, a young Muslim will find more than one version of 'authentic Islam' being presented" (p. 127). These programmes often require a fee and are attended voluntarily. Khan (2009) posits that motivations to attend can range from the "idea of leisure activity, the solidification of social networks, facilitating identity construction, alleviating the paucity of credible Muslim American religious scholars, or simply to know God and His will" (p. 124). Many institutions are virtual and do not have a fixed location,

although this has begun to change in the last decade. Yet still, their virtual location provides an offline offering from time to time. These environments are constructed and collapsed around individual religious teachers. Programmes can last for a few hours, a full day or a weekend, with longer programmes—often called “intensives”—lasting for weeks or several months.

Intensive learning environments are a type of temporary space—rented or hired sites such as a university campus or hotel—to which students come for weeks or months to study with religious teachers. The residential nature provides students with an opportunity to remove themselves from the day-to-day toil of their normal lives; to concentrate on learning about Islam in a more detailed manner than they obtain in one-off lectures and conferences. Many religious teachers use these sites to offer young Muslims an intensive educational experience against the backdrop of different regional contexts. There is an absence of any research that identifies the full extent of these programmes or their popularity. However, research by Khan (2009) and Grewal and Coolidge (2013) overlaps in their identification of the Al-Maghrib Institute, the American Learning Institute for Muslims, Zaytuna College, and the Deen Intensive Foundation (DIF) as the most popular educational organisations.

Transmedial Learning

Mandaville (2009) pays particular attention to the effects of globalisation in rendering previous discussions of authority, primarily around text, discursivity, and personified knowledge, as being insufficient. He suggests that authority must be seen in terms of how individual Muslims understand the purpose of seeking knowledge, with what tools, and in what kinds of spaces. The existing literature (Bunt, 2009; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Grewal & Coolidge, 2013) places attention on media engagement. Students often become familiar with influential

teachers of religion, although their encounters with them still largely occur via one-off events and print media.

The pervasiveness of the Internet has facilitated access to religious knowledge on many platforms. American Muslims obtain knowledge from structured online programmes or standalone courses on specific thematic topics. More informally, there are webinars or podcasts on specific themes, or recordings of Friday sermons. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Snap Chat allow students to hear religious preachers, teachers, and intellectuals directly. Teachers use social media to comment on social issues and political events. Social media also devolves into a personal realm, with teachers sharing information about their family, vacations, and travel. The social aspect of this media enables students to comment or contact the learned elite directly. Handheld devices have created a market for texting applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram, which extend learning beyond the classroom and online. Students and teachers create group chats which act as virtual learning environments. Teachers share words of wisdom, provide advice, and answer individual questions from which everyone in the group benefits.

Teachers also give lessons over the phone. The development of Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIP) - a group of technologies that allow for the communication of voice over the internet) established the technological foundation for companies like Skype and Google to provide video-chat sessions online. This enables students and teachers to create learning networks to circulate of knowledge across multiple media platforms. These platforms, each acting as a distinct piece to a whole educational approach, providing a transmedial learning experience (Jenkins, 2006; Giovagnoli, 2011).

The role of technology in the reproduction of knowledge and configuration of authority raises tensions between its use and the purported education philosophies. How does one contend with a medium that solicits immediate response while advocating an education that requires pause and reflection? How does one engender an idea of humility and dignified comportment while taking selfies? How does one create a space for intimate dialogue and critical exchange, while balancing the desire to reach a mass audience? As Meyrowitz (1985) asserts, "electronic media destroys the specialness of place, and leads to a loss of sense of place" (p. 125). From this, and the continued popularity of religious intensives and offline lecture events, it is possible to concede that while transmedial experiences provide vast virtual access to texts, knowledge, teachers, and a network of students of knowledge, face to face encounters retain their place in the ecology of learning as they create a bridge between Muslim media consumers and religious teachers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented different ways in which American Muslim communities have replicated education systems and structures of the prominent medieval period and the post-colonial era that were developed in Muslim-majority countries, making evident links between global representations of Islam across time and space. The presence of technologies augments the previously vertical flow of knowledge, as well as the domination of print culture, and the weight given to the Arabic language in teaching and learning. As American society becomes more digitised, individuals who may not have necessarily been considered amongst the learned elite are able to acquire knowledge to challenge more dominant voices as their own experiences and cultural histories interact with religious texts in new ways. Whilst voices online gain influence,

there remains a need to gather in offline spaces and to recreate classical modes of learning and for teachers to assert their legitimacy amongst the myriad of voices in the virtual domain.

I have shown how communities organise institutions to attend to the educational needs of their communities. Popular teachers are engaged in developing new educational organisations that sit alongside established institutions, thereby facilitating the reproduction of relevant, legitimate, and authentic knowledge in a Muslim-minority context. Online and offline pedagogical sites enable interlocutors of religious texts to assert their influence and authority to develop the boundaries for acceptable Islamic practice. Thus, American Muslims strive to maintain connected to a collective history while determining the best way to live in a pluralistic context.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

My exploration of the education process, focusing on knowledge and authority, aims to identify the bodies of knowledge that teachers deem vital for the development of a Muslim self. This enables an examination of authority, and the ways in which it is constructed and maintained through a recalibration of Islamic tradition. I use narratives of teachers and students to demonstrate the reshaping of the tradition in these intensive Islamic learning environments. I employ narrative inquiry as both a method and an analytical frame. In this chapter, I discuss narrative ethnography and its role in multi-sited research design. I present the rationale for selecting different field sites and discuss the challenges in gaining access on institutional and participant levels. Relatedly, I explore how my positionality came to bear on these negotiations. I also lay out the different methods I used for data collection, exhibiting how the multi-modal approach to my field work and data analysis reflects the education process exhibited in the research sites. Lastly, I discuss the ethical standards and assumptions of the university, as well as the local community, given the socio-political climate in which my respondents reside.

Narratives

As will become apparent in the chapters that follow, the processes of remembering, connecting, reworking, producing and transmitting knowledge unfold within intensive learning environments and online spaces. This is done through a process of telling and retelling of familiar historical narratives related to both religion and national history. I adopted a narrative ethnographic framework, as it lends itself to using narrative both as a method and an analytical frame. Narrative and storytelling are rooted in the human condition and contribute to the meaning we make of the world (Bruner, 1996), to process live events and contribute to our self-

development. As Gee (1985) asserts, narrative is the primary way human beings make sense of their experience. Narratives, whether written or oral, are one of the ways in which Muslim communities understand the history of Islam and its associated practices. Stories were passed from generation to generation about prophets to come. Indeed, it was the story from Biblical texts, as understood from an Islamic standpoint, which gave notice of the arrival of another prophet. Prophet Muhammad receives revelation and narrates the details of the event to his wife and then her uncle, and the stories within the Qur'ān of past prophets, peoples, and rules all point to a narrative history. The Qur'ān itself says “We tell you [Prophet] the best of stories in revealing this Qur'ān to you”⁵ and “Tell them the story so that they may reflect.”⁶

Present day, the collection of *ahadith* (sayings and doings) of the Prophet and the *sīra* provide a narrative body of work which guides Muslim practice. The writing of biographies became prominent during a time when Islamic civilisation was acquiring a more concrete identity which focused on religious learning, and as a result, we see the development of biographical accounts, particularly educational biographies, of learned men in the ninth century, which contribute to historiography of Islamic learning and the information they provide about learning networks in other geographical regions. Biographers were preoccupied with the lives of individuals engaged in the production of knowledge, most often transmitters of the sayings of the Prophet. This process was established to “identify the scholars who had legitimate authority to determine religious orthodoxy” (Makdisi, 1993, p. 373). Religious learning, and identifying teachers for learning, became inextricably tied to travel.

⁵ Qur'ān, Chapter 12, Verse 3

⁶ Qur'ān, Chapter 7, Verse 176

Travel Writing

Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) assert that “Muslim doctrine explicitly enjoins or encourages certain forms of travel” (p. 5). Muslims engage in the *rihla* (travel for the obligatory pilgrimage to Makkah); *hijra* (migration) to lands where religious practice is unconstrained; *ziyara* (visits to tombs and shrines); and *tālib-ul-‘ilm* (seeking of knowledge). Gellens’s (1990) historical work illustrates that “the hadith literature reminds the believer that the search for knowledge is intimately tied to the physical act of travel” (p. 53). This genre of literature shows

teachers and the learned as the only valuable human beings; the high merit of seeking and spreading knowledge; travelling in order to gather it; and the possession of knowledge as a sign of grace which reduces distinctions of birth and rank among Muslims. (Gellens, 1990, p. 53)

Hence, in as much as the writing of culture can be traced back to ancient Greece and the writings of Herodotus, we cannot discount the travelogues of Muslim geographers, scientists, intellectuals, scholars, and statesmen from both the East and the West, who travelled for reasons related to trade, knowledge, military expeditions and, perhaps, mere curiosity. Their narrative works, produced in Arabic or at times Persian, provided a window into the lives of people in other lands. The ninth-century *rihla* of Sulaiman al-Tajir presents travel from Iran to India and China. Al-Idrissi (d. 1161), from whom the modern-day GIS software is named, travelled from Spain to North Africa, England, and other European cities. Ibn Battuta’s (d. 1368) writings are also legendary, though much of them exists under a haze of doubt. Ibn Jubayr’s (d. 1217) trips from his home country of Spain to Arabia, Jerusalem, and Cairo present descriptions of architecture, peoples, and learning institutions. Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) travels and studies

contributed to his analysis of society as outlined in his work *al-Muqaddimah*. These are just a few examples of the link between travel and knowledge production.

Travel writing greatly contributed to the formalised ethnographic writing we have today. El Moudden (1990) makes it clear that “the medieval traveller was not, however, an aloof observer, detached from the matter of his depictions” (p. 74), supporting William’s (2012) assertion that Al-Bīrūnī’s (d. 1048) approach to studying Hinduism in India may place him as the first anthropologist. Al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) learned the local language, analysed original documents, and observed the interactions between different castes and classes of people. This may seemingly problematise the popular held belief that anthropological writing— inextricably tied to colonisation—has its roots in Britain, with Malinowski seen as the grandfather of the discipline in the late 19th century and augmented in the United States by the likes of Boas and Mead.

By presenting these Arab and Persian travel writers I do not mean to begin a discussion on subverting the West as the epicentre of ethnographic writing. Euben (2008) does this most cogently in her book, addressing Western Muslims traveling for knowledge. Rather, I aim to make clear that the participants in this research project are situated in a genealogy of travel and learning in relation to Islamic traditions. Secondly, if the objective is to explore the acts of teaching and learning, then the research must go where this occurs. This forces us to rethink pre-established notions of global Islam, local Islam, and a religious centre. It enables us to reorient ourselves to conceive of a research site as being in flux, having more fluid borders.

Narrative Ethnography

As a research methodology, narrative inquiry is taken up by researchers in fields such as communications, linguistics, sociology, and psychology. Given this, it is without a doubt that

descriptions of the methodological stance and the methods associated with its practice will lack a high degree of consistency. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry is a means by which experience can be understood through interactions in particular social milieus. It allows for students' voices to be heard and is useful "when you have individuals willing to tell their stories and you want to report their stories" (Creswell, 2012, p. 502). Popular usage of narrative ethnography is concerned with the researcher's subjectivities in relation to the research process. However, I use Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) framework, which identifies "narrative reality" as a concept comprised of two components: narrative work and narrative environments.

For the purposes of this study, narrative ethnography explores the storying process ethnographically with an attention to these two features. "Narrative work" is the purposeful activity of narration, while "narrative environment" is the situation in which the narrative unfolds (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This inclusion of the narrative environment is vital as it considers the audience and the ways in which they impact the production, editing, and circulation of stories. Abu-Lughod (1993) echoes this sentiment, acknowledging that a story is situated and has a teller and an audience. "Its teller is partial (in both sense of the word) and its telling is motivated" (p. 15). Narrative reality considers both narratives that emerge from interviews, and also those which emerge outside of it, in the physical and abstract sense of the word. As it relates to the study under discussion, stories "outside" of interviews are those which unfold in shrines, tombs, mosques, museums, classrooms, and coffee shops.

Holstein and Gubrium's (2009) framework is also useful, given my focus on both knowledge and authority. While dealing with the reworking of knowledge, a focus on the

location in which they are told enabled me to attend to the ways in which constructed and existing physical spaces are seemingly adorned or chosen to “borrow power” for legitimacy (Williams, 2012). Furthermore, narrative ethnography staves off reductionism of narrative ownership by attending to an idea of embeddedness of stories within other stories. This forces the research to contend with the issue of voice, remaining attentive to who is talking to whom and who is not, while at the same time avoiding the valorisation of someone’s “own” story, instead placing it within the larger learning context in which it occurs. It also disinters narrative silence, maintaining awareness to voices that are not heard or purposefully silenced.

Multi-sitedness

A narrative ethnography places as much focus on the narrative as it does on the place in which the narrative unfolds. Traversing multiple sites is subsumed under such an approach, as the research follows the narrative and is cognizant of each of these locales. Multi-sited ethnography concerns itself with the interactions between places and people. Multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) and multi-locale (Marcus and Fisher, 1986) ethnographic research allows researchers to attend to the dynamism that one finds in globalised information-driven societies. This type of ethnography is concerned with “connections, associations, and putative relationships” (Marcus, 1995, p. 97), ideas and identity (Leonard, 2009), and the process of establishing “translocal linkages, and the interconnections between those and whatever local bundles of relationships are also part of the study” (Hannerz 2003, p. 206).

As ethnographers seek to understand the group, we acknowledge the intersectionality of persons and the identities they exhibit during their interactions. Massey (1994) makes the case for a nuanced understanding of place and identities, recognising that a place often fails to have a

coherent identity, and is rather tied in with those of its people. She notes “[if] it is now recognised that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places” (Massey, 1994, p. 153). She makes the case for not only examining individuals and ideas which make up “the field” but also exploring multiple places inhabited. Chene (1997) suggests that multi-locale ethnography is suitable to “a historically linked group of people or an institution that has, over time, caused many people, from diverse locales, to traverse similar circuits” (p. 73). This description is particularly apt for American Muslim communities, composed of native-born Muslims and those who have roots beyond the shores of the United States. It is especially valuable when using a narrative ethnographic approach, given that religious knowledge was consistently coupled with travel in much of the intellectual histories of Muslim societies (Euben, 2008).

Critics often cite the lack of immersion within a site as a cause for the lack of depth in studies that utilise this method. Walcott (2005) sounds a resounding “yes” to the question of whether time is the defining attribute of fieldwork and the research tradition in which ethnography has its roots. Clifford (1997) strongly posits that while “multi-locale ethnography (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) is familiar; multi-locale fieldwork is an oxymoron. How many sites can be studied intensively before criteria of ‘depth’ are compromised?” (p. 57). I believe that Clifford’s (1997) contention supposes that the sites of exploration are bounded physical communities with a degree of permanence. While he uses Marcus and Fischer’s (1986) work to make his opinion on the impossibility of legitimate fieldwork being conducted in multiple locations, it is his myopia, both a product of the time in which he is situated and a rigid reading of Marcus and Fischer (1986), that prevents him from considering the depth and breadth that is

possible with multi-sited research in transnational communities in the 21st century. Such a view fails to grasp ethnography as seeing and understanding, which runs contrary to any belief that one can see from everywhere with an in-depth study of one site. This methodological framework, of researchers immersing themselves in the daily lives of communities different from their own, privileges the idea of permanence and time, to create a “thick description” of communities. Geertz’s (1973) characterisation uses the notion of prolonged interaction as the primary means by which one can obtain intimacy, and therefore depth. The assumption is that such a description can only take form after the researcher spends prolonged time (often no less than a year) with research respondents. However, this approach orients ethnographers towards research sites being characterised as sedentary and immobile. Thus, to borrow from Clifford (1997), the narrative of the natural dwelling is privileged over that of travel. I argue that time is not synonymous with depth. Intensive sites engender the depth needed for “thick description.” It is here where the idea of narrative ethnographic research in multiple sites is an obvious point of departure given that the elasticity of the approach is applicable to current trends in research.

Choice of Field-Sites

Within this study I use “field-site” or “site” to signal the different geographical locations of the educational programmes: the learning environments. It does not presuppose any boundaries in relation to the physical positioning of my research respondents. My choice of field-sites was informed by three elements. The first was knowledge of the field from my master’s thesis, which examined how information communication technologies impact the Islamic educational landscape, and as a result, the hierarchy of religious authority. This literature review provided insight into prominent online educational programmes and their teachers. The second

is the result of my examination of the “The Muslim 500”, a list of the world’s most influential Muslims, collected by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, an independent research organisation affiliated with the Royal Aal-Bayt Institute in Jordan. I identified the names of individuals from North America which appeared on the list from 2009-2013 and cross-referenced these with the names and institutions from my master’s research. It should be noted that after over a year of attempting to contact the Institute in Jordan, I was unable to obtain details on the methods used to generate the list. Third, my review of the academic literature (Haddad, Senzai, and Smith, 2009; Karim, 2009; Hammer & Safi, 2013; Smith and Haddad, 2014; Grewal, 2015) and unpublished dissertations (Grewal, 2006; Yuskaev, 2010), informed the selection of educational programmes and their associated learning environments. However, some institutions were either virtual or organised for a relatively short period of time (two to four days), and therefore untenable for a project seeking “thick description.” Others were for a longer period (more than one year) and were not feasible for the length allocated for doctoral research. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that the programmes would be well-attended, and thus my selection criteria included programmes that were at least three years old and operating with a consistent student base each year.

Based on information provided on websites for each of the programmes, I grouped the programmes into two categories: (1) those that seek to preserve sacred Islamic knowledge and (2) those that look for ways to operationalise knowledge for self-improvement and social change. In the first case, the educational programmes identify specific knowledge that is in danger of being lost or forgotten. It is through providing these educational experiences that the programmes seek to renew and maintain an interest in knowledge that has passed from a chain

of authenticated transmitters. The latter category is characterised by programmes that provide knowledge one needs to be a “literate” Muslim, equipped with the requisite information to adequately practice one’s faith. Such a practice is not only geared to one’s relationship with God but also with individuals and structures of society. However, these categories should not be taken as clear distinctions since, as will become clear in the following chapters, the line between them is often quite blurred.

Each learning environment in the study is a snapshot of teaching and learning occurring at a point in time. Every new student brings his or her own varied experiences that imbue the place with different impressions, and returning students bring different versions of themselves. Whilst I don’t lay any claims of generalisability, I believe that the “thick description” approach allows for transferability of research findings to other research contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These learning environments are structured to illustrate the relevancy of Sunni Islamic traditions to the lives of American Muslims, while simultaneously being connected its intellectual.

Field-Sites for Comparative Exploration

Given the objective of this study to explore the process of education via a focus on knowledge and authority, and the conclusions of the literature review outlining the dearth of research studies on the topic beyond the European and Muslim-majority context, as well as the macrosocial comparative studies, I used four intensive Islamic learning environments as field-sites of observation. By choosing these different learning environments, I can explore the similarities and differences amongst each of the programmes, all of which share a common goal. Learning environments that highlight their own attention to the socio-political and cultural

context is important to understand the role knowledge and authority play in reshaping Islamic Sunni tradition within an American Muslim setting. Furthermore, as each of the ethnographic chapters take shape, the picture of education presents many tensions and complexities that are not readily apparent with an examination of one learning environment. Furthermore, to mitigate problems that may arise from totalising narratives, especially given the heightened media and political attention on Muslim communities globally, conclusions drawn from a study which analyses Muslim education in a Western context can provide nuance to a complex discussion. The use of Asad’s (1986) discursive framework, following his later reflections (Scott, 2006,) calls for attention to the ways in which tradition attends to the problems encountered, and the ways in which it is pushed onto new terrain. The four sites, all with a focus on attending to modern day challenges, describe these new terrains and the circumstances which contribute to their development.

I conducted research from June 2013 - September 2014, in the United States: Michigan (three weeks), Texas (one month); Canada: Toronto (one week); and Turkey: Konya and Istanbul (three weeks). The ethnographic exploration of these sites included classroom sessions as well as a variety of planned and impromptu activities of the programme itself and different groups of students. I noted interactions between teachers and students—inside and outside of the classroom, curricula content, teaching style, student perceptions of teachers and peers, and online activity.

Table 1: Research Field Sites

	Site 1: ALIM	Site 2: Dream	Site 3: RIS	Site 4: Rihla
Tuition Cost	\$1,400	\$7,875	\$160	\$3,150
Accommodation	Included	Not included	Not included	Included
Meals	Included	Not Included	Not included	Included
Travel/Airfare	Not included	Not Included	Not included	Not included

Extra Activities	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Location	Livonia, Michigan	Dallas, Texas	Toronto, Canada	Konya & Istanbul, Turkey*
Duration	3 weeks	9 months	1 week	3 weeks

**The programme location changes every few years. In 2014, the programme took place in Turkey.*

Negotiating Access

Obtaining access to institutions is a consistent hurdle for researchers. My experiences were perhaps fraught with even more challenges, given the popularity that many of the teachers enjoy. The learning sites of this study are a part of institutions that have affiliated influential teachers or have one influential scholar at the centre of the institution. The ALIM, RIS, and *Rihla* programmes fall under the first category while the Dream programme belongs to the second. These teachers belong to what Cookson (1994) refers to as an “ideological field” given their ability to influence the opinion of their religious constituents. Their domain of influence can often not only extend beyond local Muslim communities, but reach the gates of the White House. The presence of these teachers is requested at State dinners, advisory meetings, and political party national conventions.

Across the ocean, in Muslim-majority countries, government officials request these teachers’ advice on national education, and ask them to sit on advisory boards or to take part in national television programming that aims to mitigate the spread of religious extremism. Local Muslim organisations also invite teachers for speaking tours. In this sense, they are a select, elite group of people who enjoy some degree of consensual power, which places them in various types of leadership roles within society (Williams, 2012). Noting Odendal and Shaw’s (2002) observation that access to elites “typically requires extensive preparation, homework, creativity on the part of the researcher, as well as the right credentials and contacts” (p. 30), I initiated contact with institutions one month after the start of my doctoral programme in 2012. The

timeliness of my success varied given the degree of formal vetting I experienced with each institution.

The Dream programme was the easiest to access, most probably due to my personal connections with the founder's family and friends. Nouman Ali Khan, the founder of Bayyinah Institute, is originally from New York City. His wife and sister-in-law attended Hofstra University, whose Muslim Students Association held several events in tandem with my alma mater's Muslim Student Association, Stony Brook University. This relationship with his wife and sister-in-law gave me an advantage in obtaining access, and conceivably provided me with a great degree of freedom of movement during my fieldwork, as I discuss in the sections that follow. After receiving Khan's email address from a close friend who completed the Dream programme, I contacted him in January 2013, and thereafter spoke with him over the phone. We discussed my research objectives and what my presence would entail. He warmly welcomed me and provided me with contact information for one of his staff members to finalise logistics.

Obtaining access to ALIM was also relatively straightforward. I contacted a friend, in December 2012, who is well acquainted with the founders of the ALIM institution. After connecting with one of the board members, I sent a brief outline of my research study as requested. Shortly thereafter, I was asked to submit all interview and focus group questions, which would go through the approval of the programme's teachers. I was given the green light at the beginning of the new year.

I initiated contact with Deen Intensive Foundation (DIF), host of the *Rihla* programme in November 2012, by sending a blurb about my research study to the "info" email account. I

received a response after a follow-up email in March 2013, requesting more information about my research, but thereafter it was silence for months.

I contacted the RIS organisation in December 2012, but after four months I had not received a reply. A friend, active in Toronto Muslim communities, provided me with the personal email address of someone who could potentially help. We communicated between April and October 2013. Finally, in November 2013, I was asked to send my CV for vetting. We arranged a Skype call with a representative of the organisation, during which time we spoke about my previous professional work and research project. It became clear that his role was to gather information about my background and research objectives, to ascertain whether I would cause problems for the organisation. In December 2013, the organisation's director contacted me via phone, two weeks before the start of the programme. After a brief conversation regarding what I would need to carry out my research, he sent an email introducing me to some of the administrating staff, asking for them to accommodate my attendance. It was this advocate associated with RIS who provided me with the personal email of the director of DIF, for access to the *Rihla* programme.

At the end of January 2014, I sent an email to request attending *Rihla*, to be held in August 2014. After a few weeks of intermittent communication, I received informal access in April 2014. However, one month before the programme was set to start, logistics were still not finalised. I reached out again and was put in touch with someone to provide me with detailed program information, two weeks before I needed to be on-site in Turkey.

The initial reception from programme administrators was key in determining how I needed to position myself as a researcher and gather volunteers to participate in the study. Prior

to the start of each programme, I requested five minutes of time to introduce myself and explain my attendance to the students. The objective was to convince students to grant me permission to shadow them during the duration of the programme, and to submit to my random questions wherever I found them to be. My pitch highlighted the importance of their voices being heard. I used previous knowledge of criticisms levelled by other Muslims communities regarding these programmes being a waste of time, as well as media speculation outside religious communities that these programmes are sites of radicalisation, to encourage them to add their voices to the conversation. I was able to have this short time to speak to the large groups in each setting apart from the RIS programme in Toronto which, with over 200 participants, meant that connecting with people was difficult, and my data collection suffered as a result.

Data Collection

Using narrative ethnography as a methodological approach, I employed different methods to understand what and how knowledge is produced, as well as the narratives that serve as a construction of the authority of teachers, and the motivations of learners. My choice of methods considered the ways in which students make meaning and communicate their experiences (e.g. notes, drawing, social media posts), as well as the means through which teachers and programme staff transmit knowledge and highlight the importance of religious teachers in the education process in shared spaces. By using various methods, I could capitalise on the affordances of different media to apprehend the meaning-making occurring in and around each of the learning environments.

I collected data using questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and document analysis, while engaging in participant observation. After my five-minute pitch, I asked students to raise

their hand if they were interested in participating or to locate me later during the programme. Those who volunteered were provided with an informed consent sheet⁷ as well as a questionnaire (See Appendix D) to be filled out before the programme was fully underway.

I used participant observation as a “field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, respondent and informant interviewing, direct participation and observation, and introspection” (Denzin, 1978, p. 183). Most consistently, I attended “classroom” lectures. Outside of the classroom, I attended group visits to museums, shrines, tombs, and overnight stays in mosques. Additionally, I spent time with students at coffee shops, restaurants, roller-skating rinks, ice-cream parlours, picnics, and home dinner parties. Most of these activities were gender-segregated or only held for one gender. In the former, I could navigate between both gendered groups, while in the latter situation, I was forced to follow up with male participants after the event. At times, students sent me texts or emails with observations about programme activities that they thought I would find useful or information about things which occurred in their residences, which provided me with further insight to what I observed in the classroom.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are useful in that they enable conversation to develop, allowing for a wide range of responses to be heard among peers (Powney & Watts, 1987). The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group (Morgan, 1988). Not only does the group

⁷ The first iteration of the informed consent sheet communicated that participants would be anonymised. However, I verbally amended this in the first learning environment, communicating to students that they could choose a name for identification. I later made the written change on the informed consent sheets.

interaction allow for the observation of behaviour, but also the opinions and ideas that are given are potentially modified based on the social interaction (Wilkinson, 1999).

I elected to use focus groups with students, given the elite nature of the teachers and the positions of power they held. At some points during my time in the second learning environment, the teacher would tell the male students to go and find something to do when he saw them speaking with me outside of the classroom. Focus groups engender interaction and communication, providing safe spaces to hear from individuals with limited power (Morgan, 1993)—"lay Muslims" (Karim, 2009), as well as revealing these opinions to the powerful (Morgan, 1993). Relying solely on observations inside or outside of the classroom would prevent me from fully interrogating the concept of authority and from enabling students to talk without fear of repercussions or negative bias from teachers or programme staff.

Interviews

Interviewing allows for the use of open-ended questions with a specific focus to elicit individual responses (McMillan, 2004) and provides a significant amount of data for the research project, exemplifying Briggs's (2007) assertion of their narrative power to "produce subjects, texts, knowledge, and authority" (p. 552). I sampled from the group of students who volunteered to participate in the study to conduct interviews. I made choices based on my observations about students' willingness to engage in a discussion about their experiences and their relationship with their peers. Although it was easy to identify individuals who were outspoken, my research stance considered the seen and unseen in educational research. Thus, I also sought out students who were on the periphery of classroom dynamics. This included students left out of the recounting of events that happened in class, or students who didn't participate much in

class but were top performers. I remained attentive to narrative silencing during interviews, when narratives omitted certain elements, characters, or events that I had observed or had been mentioned by other research respondents. With teachers, I prioritised interviewing those whom the institutions considered main teachers and those whom most directly impacted the development of the curriculum.

Media: Documents, Websites, Photographs, and Social Media

Williams (2012) states that document research “treats any form of text—written word, images, internet resources, transcripts of conversation and rhetoric—as primary data which can be interrogated much as an interviewee would be questioned” (p. 141). I reviewed websites of each of the organisations as well as websites associated with individual teachers. I conducted this review to identify both the objectives of the organisations and the programmes which they administer. This also facilitated an understanding of the intellectual orientations of the teachers and how their educational philosophies fit within the learning environment. I also used classroom materials such as handouts, programme booklets and schedules to explore the bodies of knowledge making up the curricula content and the ways in which subjects (see Table 2) are organised.

Table 2: Programme Subjects

ALIM	Dream	RIS	Rihla
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Qur’ānic Sciences ▪ Hadith Criticism ▪ Comparative Islamic Law ▪ Lessons from “Station of Divine Lovers” ▪ Exegesis ▪ Philosophy of Islamic Law ▪ Shi’ism and Sufism ▪ Islam and Modernity ▪ Lessons from “The Reliever” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Classical Arabic ▪ Modern Standard Arabic ▪ Qur’ānic Introduction to Judaic Studies ▪ 40th hadith of Imam Nawawi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Question and Advice of the Seekers of Knowledge ▪ Lessons from the Farewell Speech of the Prophet ▪ Glimpses of al-Ghazālī’s Book Condemning Status and Ostentation ▪ On Divine and Human Love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Islamic Theology ▪ Devotional Law ▪ Spiritual Cultivation ▪ Praiseworthy Innovation ▪ al-Ghazālī’s Book of Knowledge ▪ Exegesis of sūra al-Fatiha ▪ Poetry of Mevlana Rumi

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ History of Islamic Law ▪ Ethics ▪ Diseases of the Heart ▪ Islamic Law ▪ Biograph of the Prophet ▪ Islamic Intellectual History ▪ Islam in America 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ al-Naseeha al-Kafiya of Sidi Ahmad Zarruq⁸ ▪ Rethinking Spirituality, Solidarity, and Society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Journey Through the Masnavi of Mevlana Rumi ▪ Law of Finances ▪ Law of Family
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My interest in the role of knowledge and authority within these environments required focus on configurations of relationships between students, teachers, and the bodies of knowledge identified, no matter the form in which they were presented. Additionally, I explored virtual representations of teaching and learning (student and teacher) through images—their captions and comments, tweets, Facebook posts and WhatsApp group conversations. I took photographs to facilitate my recollection, transitioning into capturing signs and symbols of emerging research themes. In rare cases, I used artefacts of student work produced in the learning environments (conceptual maps, drawings, and notes) as data sources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process through which researchers unearth connections, themes, and links from the data to develop an understanding of the research topic. Boeije (2010) breaks the process into two stages, data segmentation and reassembly. During this process we disassemble, deconstruct, fragment, and categorise to characterise, structure, synthesise and model data to present the ethnographic project. This process, however, has the potential to strip the data from the context of its development, treating responses as singular units for individual analysis. Given the potential drawbacks, Miles and Huberman (1998) endorse a research cycle whereby data is

⁸ Text of advice on the spiritual path; rethinking spirituality

examined multiple times using different techniques to detect new codes, and apply ones previously identified, through the literature or other sources. I used a hybrid approach to analysis, using deductive and inductive methods to identify themes during the process of data collection and more developed analysis after the end of the data collection phase.

Given my methodological framework, I conducted analyses by examining themes that developed from the narratives being told and the place in which they were told, as they relate to both space and time. Hence, I remained attentive to the themes which unfolded in the narratives told by students and teachers, but also the themes that developed in the activities, behaviours, and images I observed. In this way, the spatial positioning of teachers and students in linear and mythical time was interrogated to examine the idea of knowledge and the construction and maintenance of religious authority. I identified deductive themes related to motivations for participation in voluntary Islamic learning environments and the types of teachers that students found relevant, based on an examination of the literature hitherto available.

Regarding inductive themes, I subjected open-ended questionnaire responses to content analysis by identifying a set of categories and tallying frequencies (Silverman, 2001). I used the data gleaned from questionnaires and participant observation to put my interview and focus group schedules through another round of analysis. My analysis of data from social media was conducted on two levels. The first, in relation to students, was to compare the physical representations of their learning experiences to their online projections; for example, students posting images of their course material and the classroom, but not often being present in class. The second was at the administrative level, whereby staff encouraged students to disconnect from social media but posted images from the classroom or programme activities to the public,

or even reposted images from students in the learning environment. I use many of these throughout the ethnographic findings chapters as illustrations of the careful construction of both the environment but also of the narrative work being done within them. Through each of these analyses, I identify a variety of narratives that enable me to present a nuanced representation of the education of these students.

Researcher Positionality

In a two-family house situated in Queens, New York, a little girl sat reading words from a sacred text, squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to sear them onto her memory. Words that held no true meaning to her but which she knew were of great importance, as her parents referred to them constantly. Born to a West African immigrant father and an American mother with Pan-African leanings, one would expect that the little girl's eyes would beam a confidence reflective of a luminous historical legacy, a self-assuredness compounded from a rich concoction of gender, race, culture, religion, and nationality. However, when she opened them, not a trace of such an elixir was detected. Instead, there she sat, an African-American Muslim girl, swirling internal chaos gathering inside, lacking a true understanding of the meaning of the words she had parroted. She passed through her years of education, gradually becoming an expert in ignoring the swirling chaotic confusion, a dim sense of ignorant familiarity. However, determined to address this ignorance and attend to teachers from countries who didn't understand the context in which she grew up, lived, and continued to exist dictate her identity, one winter day, now a young woman, she emptied her bank account, and found herself at Cairo International Airport.

I remained in Cairo, the seat of religious education in Egypt, for close to two years, studying Arabic and other Islamic sciences. My interaction with the people and their culture enabled me to obtain a deeper understanding of the language and caused me to reflect on my own American culture and how religious practice attends to tradition as well as sociocultural context.

It wasn't until the last semester of my master's studies that the discord would begin to take on definable form. In a research methods course, I struggled to find a topic to analyse for my final project. I kept remembering the words of the professor, "find something that matters to you." I began a process of reflection over the varied events of my personal, professional, and educational experiences and travels. Having only recently returned from a year and a half in Cairo, where I studied Arabic and other Islamic sciences, I thought back to the centres and institutes, their objectives, teacher-student relationships and methods of knowledge. Suddenly, the

image of that little girl with her eyes shut trying to memorise Quranic verses became seared on the inner screen of my mind's eye. In a flash of intuition, the little girl's future projection drew a causal line connecting the effect of the shared sense of internal chaos to rote method of knowledge acquisition; a mere parroting of internally meaningless words, externally meaningful by scholars without any context to identity construction in America. "Yes, this must be the cause," I intuited. I scoured Islamic education in the American context and was frustrated by the dearth of material that addressed the authority of these scholars and the content of what they taught. With these findings in mind, I began to construct my thesis, working to bring my study area—computing in education—into contact with religious education and identity formation. I was prompted to take a look at the ways in which knowledge was traditionally acquired as I delved deeper into the ways in which technology is used to teach Muslims, contributing to identity development in a post-9/11 world.

This vignette serves as a starting point to understand my own positionality in relation to the research topic, the social context in which I conduct it, as well as to the experiences of my research participants. By disclosing parts of my own identity and experiences, I intend to contribute to an understanding of the different lenses through which students viewed me. I also hope this enables the reader to better understand what I observed and the overall context and limitations of the study.

The process of developing relationships in an ethnographic project relies on the willingness of research respondents to openly participate, in addition to the researcher's persona(s). Ethnographic work requires the researcher to endeavour to remain in a reflexive state, acknowledging that she influences the research project. When contrasting the experiences of ethnographers in religious settings and non-religious settings (McRoberts, 2004), the objectivity of researchers engaged in religious ethnography, to the point of empathetic accounting, is often seen as compromising the scholarly integrity of study in its failure to maintain the purity of theory. Moreover, Archer (2001) notes that matches or differences in race between the researcher and research participants can interact to generalise or silence accounts.

It is indeed a tricky practice to work out a way to be part of one's own culture and at the same time to be out of it (Postman & Weingartner, 1978). Arweck and Stringer's (2002) volume takes on the objective/subjective dichotomy in relation to religious ethnography, stating that someone of the same "faith" as their research respondents does not necessarily hold the same beliefs, and that notions of insider/outsider rather reside on a continuum. Indeed, one can be both an insider and an outsider simultaneously and during different instances of ethnographic exploration. I would, therefore, argue that the ethnographer is able to be objectively subjective of herself as a subjectified object. I, therefore, abjured any sense of being objective and adopted Abu-Lughod's (1991) perspective that "every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking is from somewhere" (p. 141), whilst understanding that no single voice has the capacity for the whole truth (Pearson, 2002).

Being a black Muslim woman researcher and wearing a headscarf afforded me a level of acceptability within religious settings and access to gendered groups, as well as racial/ethnic cliques, whilst also excluding me from others. As the vignette describes, my background mirrored many of the students', although in a different decade. Furthermore, my academic history and current place at an elite university often positioned me as an advisor to students considering graduate school. My time in the Middle East, spent studying Arabic and Islamic texts, placed me in a similar role with other students who hoped to study Arabic overseas. However, these things also inhibited my movement in other ways, or made people wary of me. Many students echoed concerns by religious scholars regarding Muslims studying anything related to Islam in secular universities. There was a fear that in doing so, one might abandon the faith altogether, given the need to question and interrogate Islam.

When it came to gender, the environments discouraged fraternisation between men and women. In the classroom or lecture hall, sexes were segregated either by physical barriers or designated seating arrangements. Outside of the classroom, students stayed in separate living quarters and often had access to designated rooms for lounging or prayer. This required careful navigation on my part, to obtain some semblance of balance in understanding student experiences, and not upset the religious sensibilities and norms of the organisation or students.

In many cases, I would say that the students treated me as one of the guys/gals, holding my research role in abeyance as we interacted. This was not always a good thing. As a natural consequence of following some groups around and not others, students saw me not only as a privileged student but also someone who played favourites. “There are so many cliques here, but you’re lucky you get invited into all of them,” one young woman commented to me. Another young woman angrily said to me one day, “I invited you to hang out so many times and you always say no, and then you’re hanging out with other people. If a friendship is valuable, then you make time.” When one young male student spotted me talking with one of his classmates, a research respondent, he commented with a bit of a smile, “Oh, you and Salman always have your private time.” A non-respondent young woman observing my interactions commented, “God has gifted you with something. Everyone wants to talk to you and be your friend,” while another woman said, “I know you don’t have time for me because you are so popular.” My success was sometimes a detriment to building other relationships. Thus, I continued to be reflexive and in many instances, I spent time smoothing ruffled feathers as to not allow distance to creep in and negatively impact the study. In one case, I saw the successful relationship I built with a student, wherein I would hesitantly express my opinion on topics such as teaching, gender

relations, or other matters, influence her own opinions. In another case, my reticence led some to be suspicious of me, resulting in consistent accusations, though said to have been made in jest, of being an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency in the guise of a doctoral student.

These examples illustrate how, as a researcher, I had to navigate multiple fields within the field and that my role was context- and situation-dependent. In such a reflexive state, sometimes I needed to give more of myself and at other times I needed to give less.

This delicate, continuous shifting of roles brings to mind Spindler's (2006) retelling of fieldwork he and his wife conducted. "We had to become different people in order to do good fieldwork. Our situated selves had to change, and they did" (p. 67), as he discusses his fieldwork among Native-American communities in the late 1940s. This was perhaps more acute for me given the movement required for my multi-sited study. Furthermore, Hastrup (1990) notes that the ethnographer

...will inevitably live and work in the third person. As such she is a friend to the locals and a stranger to herself... It is not solely a matter of both participating (assuming the role of you) and observing (keeping my professional aims intact), but also, and more importantly, to let go of both and live, feel and experience from the position of the third person (p. 268).

I established relationships by chatting with students about topics related to popular TV shows, academic careers, family troubles, and marriage, during class breaks or other programme activities. However, it was challenging to develop close relationships with men, as such an activity falls outside of what is traditionally accepted within the rules of the programme and the spatial configuration between men and women. I mention the programme administration, not students, given that whilst there were many who did not see mixing as acceptable, there were many who did, and therefore made connections in physical spaces outside of the classroom as

well as online. Nonetheless, like Powdermaker (1993), I was able to spend a considerable amount of time with both women and men, apart from living accommodations and male-only bonding activities. I feel similarly to Abu Lughod (1986), that “my access to both worlds was more balanced than a man’s would have been. Except in rare instances, male researchers in sex-segregated societies have far less access to women than I had to men” (p. 23). Yet, as a Muslim woman, when amongst women I dressed and behaved in a way that was within an acceptable range of decorum I observed from the participants. However, with the men, with no model, I questioned myself as soon as I woke up in the morning, when I knew my time in the classroom would be spent doing observations on their side of the room. Should I wear perfume? Should I remove my nail polish? Are the sleeves of my blouse long enough? Would make-up be too much? There was a continued re-evaluation of my sartorial choices but also the ways in which I acted or held myself so as to not put any of them off from speaking with me.

Recognising that the work of an ethnographer is to understand participants and be continuously reflexive, the nature of anthropological research in Muslim environments necessitates that one also understands the ways in which participants engage with the past to understand the present. The discursivity of Islamic tradition requires such an effort. This specificity to space and time is a characteristic of not only the tradition but of transitional spaces. In searching for a modified quotidian, students are “...crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person [they] have been but no longer are and the person [they] will become” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 62).

Harking back to Spindler (2006) and Hastrup’s (1990) assertions, the ethnographic narrative researcher is also “different”, altered by the research process and now laden with the

life stories and experiences of her respondents. It moves the researcher into an everyday ethnographer, with a habit that “equips one with empathy and versatility to keep learning in new professional contexts” (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 168). My own experience exemplifies this outcome. The laughter, anger, tears, and smiles captured in interview recordings, focus group conversations, notebooks of field notes, videos, and pictures I gathered and then immersed myself in over a year of analysis, imbued me with a sense a deep understanding of these education processes.

Ethics

The University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approved my research (See Appendix C). Each of my participants signed an informed consent sheet after I explained the purpose and potential outcomes of the study. I informed them that the institutions would be disclosing their name for the sake of the study, and thus their identity could be possibly revealed through deductive disclosure. Additionally, as I stated above, I reminded students of my role as a researcher, despite how natural it may have seemed that I was attending the programme, given my positionality.

I paid close attention to the research process, in addition to the potential outputs. What methods would I use to go about collecting data while simultaneously acknowledging the making of reality by my participants in a temporary environment? How would I come to understand what I observed and my relation to it? How would I develop an account of my observations for my academic peers as well as my participants? Furthermore, concern must be placed on the issue of a researcher living in a community, particularly in a Muslim environment, within a charged anti-Muslim or Islamophobic atmosphere. During the past decade in the United States,

there have been several media reports of whistleblowing from covert Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informants, police department wiretaps, and infiltration within Muslim communities. So, despite my positionality playing a role in paving the way for a degree of acceptance within the community, it was also challenged.

Public discourse around terrorism and more specifically, “home-grown terrorism” is popularised in TV shows such as “24” and “Homeland”. That being said, fears of community members airing “dirty laundry” exist, which could force research respondents to oscillate between disclosure and reticence, to avoid long-term problems for their communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Notwithstanding, the concept of *umma* whereby, theoretically, categories of racial, socio-economic, nationalistic, or gender-related alliances are not a means of division but rather establish Muslims as one brotherhood united by creed, has the potential to cause individuals to close ranks under close scrutiny. It was, therefore, imperative that I remain attentive to the ways in which the research could unearth sensitive issues for participants around their interactions with their communities, religious or otherwise.

Many of these concerns fall outside the explicit ethical standards of the ethics committee’s concern with “do no harm” and the rights and protection of the individual. Therefore, I embraced an “ethical attitude”, which provided the needed structure to house both university ethics’ board requirements, and the ethical attitudes of my research participants. Such a stance facilitates “thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honour and protect those who participate in one's studies while still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship” (Josselson, 2007, p. 537). I continuously reminded participants of my reason for being in the learning environment. “I’m a researcher,” I would often say. At times students

seemed to forget my research role and after divulging very personal information, giving strong opinions about a subject, or making silly or inappropriate jokes, they would ask me, “Are you going to write about this?” I assured them I would.

Towards the end of the data collection phase, I requested contact information from some respondents, informing them of my desire to be able to solicit their feedback during the writing process. At times, this negotiation also required divulging my own personal information. I was cautious about my responses to what was being said in the classroom by teachers. I feared judgment and negative sentiments potentially jeopardising future access to research participants or the learning environments. However, I did not seek to engage in deception to fit into the group, instead, I was often evasive. Like Katz (1996), I felt that the “the politics was intensely personal,” (p. 172). However, I was not strategically untruthful. I did divulge many personal matters, as it seemed only fair and wise from a research perspective. I believe this enabled me to build seemingly open relationships that allowed me to shine a light on their experiences so that I may reformulate my existing knowledge and generate new paths of exploration.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the use of narrative both as a method and analytical frame suits both the nature of the research questions and the genealogy of the research participants. Intensive learning environments bring teachers and students together offline, allowing for the observation of the reproduction of knowledge. The intent of this proximity is to engender warmth and security, whereby students can see themselves as part of a family. This creates an opportunity for deep ethnographic exploration. The inherent presence of

movement in the research sites made narrative ethnography, with a multi-sited inflection, an obvious choice.

My choice of different learning environments is suitable for narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) which attends to both the identified bodies of knowledge and the place where knowledge is transmitted. I used multiple means of collecting data to come to a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between students and teachers, and how knowledge and authority are shuttled between them. My own shuttling was a tireless endeavour. Despite the many ways in which my own positionality matched fragments of students' identities, my fieldwork was fraught with ups and downs, as well as organic and deliberate roadblocks. Nonetheless, I was attentive to the vulnerabilities of my research participants inside and outside of their religious communities, given the politically charged climate in the United States.

CHAPTER 4: THE SPIRIT'S ACTION – REVIVING THE ISLAMIC SPIRIT

Fatima: A Portrait

“I was quite distant from Islam. I guess the only way I practiced it was that I fasted in Ramadan and I would only eat halal. Those were the only two things that I did,” Fatima says, chuckling over the simplicity of her practice. A Toronto native and a most unlikely attendee to the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) educational programme, Fatima talks about her “awakening.” Her relationship with RIS began with the intention to accumulate volunteer hours for university credit.

I started volunteering with RIS when I was sixteen. I volunteered with them for five years and then it was time for me to move on to other things, but then I started coming as an attendee...I learned so much. That enlightenment that I felt, that spiritual awakening I felt at RIS made me come back again for the next five years.,

The timing of the programme over the past few years—during the Christmas holiday—in relation to the changing month of Ramadan benefited Fatima, now in her mid-twenties.

To me, it's the midpoint between Ramadan...because Ramadan is like a spiritual high. You have all these goals and you do all these things in Ramadan and you're like, I'm going to try and continue after and then it starts like...suddenly stuff starts tapering off. Then you come to RIS and you feel it again. You're like oh no, I need to get back on top of it. I need to be on top of this stuff. So, you continue doing all that. At least try to continue. It's that awakening as I mentioned before. It's like...my friends and I call it hajj without going to hajj. It's that awakening that you feel.

The explicit religious orientation of the programme allows Fatima to make her journey and remain at the premises overnight, on her own for a week. Her parents, whom she describes as “really religious” and “quite traditional and conservative” are fans of the programme. However, the alignment of thought between Fatima and her parents has its limitations. She is the black sheep of her Pakistani family and an oddity at RIS, given her transgender identification.

I identify as Trans. I was born a female. I identify as male. And at some point, within the next couple of years, I'd say, I will be taking hormones to change that and go through surgeries. It's something that, interestingly enough...it's never been an issue with myself. I've never had to go through that acceptance period with myself. I've been like this since I was a child. I was like...even looking at my childhood pictures when I was four or five years old, playing dress-up...traditionally girls are wearing their mom's clothes, I'd go dress in my dad's clothes. I'd be playing with action figures. I was always presented as male. I hung out with the boys and played with the boys. And then I identified as a boy.

That was okay until I hit puberty. Then it all had to change. But that never changed...I still identified as such. [But] it was like I couldn't voice it anymore because it was like no, you know you're a girl now. My mom was just like, you can't play with the boys anymore because you know, you're growing now...all these excuses. And you're just like...you're like, I don't understand. But I never...my identity and being out to myself never really changed. I kind of hid myself and then that was one of the reasons I became distant from Islam.

Although her gender identity was one cause for her departure from mainstream religious practice, Fatima, like the other knowledge seekers around her, also felt the absence of a connection to or an understanding of the sacred.

I didn't connect with it at that time, at that age. It was too much force from my parents. They'd be like, no you need to do this. And I didn't understand the reason behind it. It was like, no you must do it. And if I asked questions it would be like because Islam said so, but that wasn't sufficient. It wasn't a sufficient answer for me. I've always been a person who is like, if something doesn't make sense to me I'm not going to do it. Even academically, socially, morally, like if it doesn't make sense to me I'm not a blind follower. Like I have reasons for my beliefs. And just because my parents believe in it doesn't mean I'm going to believe in it. It needs to make sense to me. So, I never connected with it at that time.

Having found her source for spiritual enlightenment, Fatima is unwilling to give it up, despite the blatant ostracism she knows she will receive at the hands of her peers and teachers. Whilst in previous years, her long hair visibly identified her as a girl, her tomboyish sartorial choices and very short hair make her seem like just another "brother" in the crowds. But when she begins to speak eyes go wide with confusion and surprise. A woman?! "I've only had an issue with it when I've been to environments like this. Really religious environments where people question me. Otherwise, I've never had an issue reconciling my faith and my identity," she clarifies. Questions about her gender, advice to dress as a woman, or suggestions to go "find" God in order for this ailment to be lifted, are all put to her. It does beg the question as to where else one would find God if not at a gathering for the reception of religious guidance. However, Fatima isn't deterred.

The reason why I come to places like this is because...I have to remind myself that this is my relationship with God. And God is the only one that is going to judge me at the end of the day. People can come and tell me that I'm wrong. People can say whatever they want. They can tell me that I'm going to hell, which I've heard many times. But at the end of the day, ultimately, God is going to be the one judging me. And if I'm doing something, like making me more comfortable to become closer to God in a way, then to me it's

worth the sacrifice. Because that's what we're here for. It's to please Allah. This life is a test. We need to do what we can over here for the hereafter. And that's what I remind myself every time. Even when I am in uncomfortable situations.

.....

Like other youth her age, Fatima struggles to remain grounded in her faith's tradition while dealing with the everyday challenges of getting on with life. Despite the ways Fatima's sexuality diverges from the normative heterosexual imperative of orthodoxy and mainstream neo-traditional interpretations, she is still firmly placed in the tradition of knowledge transmission. Her continued attendance at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit Knowledge Retreat (RIS) enables her to seek religious knowledge for personal development. Religious teachers build on their students' existing knowledge to recalibrate their understanding of Islam for a new mode of practice. Teachers link students to certain aspects of Islamic tradition by curating knowledge from classical texts to provide students with a sense of spirituality that will serve them in their daily lives. Concomitantly, other teachers impress upon students the need to ensure that this spirituality imbues an activist spirit—stressing the need to engage in acts of social justice. This demonstrates the ways in which teachers work to conceptualise the boundaries for acceptable and ethical practice, whilst maintaining a sense of coherence in tradition.

The *Knowledge Retreat*, unlike other temporary learning environments in historically resonant locations or in educational institutions situated in Muslim communities, is held in a location that has no proximation to Muslims—a hotel conference room. Programme staff artificially construct a stage, reminiscent of some location in Arabia, upon which teachers sit to lecture. Such an exhibition shows how narratives are selected and retold in natural or constructed sociocultural contexts. Place setting is one of the many ways in which Islamic tradition is reshaped for a modern context. Furthermore, the personal biographies of teachers provide a background to understand how select narratives hold significance for interpretative

stances and contribute to how teachers authoritatively situate their voices within the melee of voices speaking on behalf of Islam.

A Lost Spirit

Young Muslims in Toronto created RIS in 2003. Their mission is to help the youth “overcome new challenges of communication and integration” by promoting “stronger ties within the North American society through reviving the Islamic tradition of education, tolerance and introspection, and across cultural lines through points of commonality and respect,” as expressed on their website. To this end, the organisation puts on a yearly convention showcasing “Islamic leadership from across the globe sharing a common platform before the widest cross section of [the] community” (RIS website, n.d.). This is often limited to men with theological leanings that support the maintenance of the *ijaza* tradition. The numbers in attendance have steadily increased over the years. In 2012, attendance reached an all-time high of 25,000 (Ezzat, 2012). To cater to the large number of people, LCD screens are set up around the convention room. Men with headsets sit in mobile chairs around the hall. Their seats swivel high and low, left and right, as though on a movie set, to capture every part of the speaker on stage and the audience watching. Over the course of three days, participants are subjected to a heavy programme, with a line-up of more than ten speakers. A large bazaar is spread out over the premises with stalls selling clothing, books, tapes, jewellery and much more. It is an intense, highly-charged, and crowded scene, day in and day out. Should money for programme registration, travel, and hotel accommodation be prohibitive, one can purchase a livestream option for home viewing. And if the fast pace and crowds are not to one’s liking, the Knowledge Retreat provides a more intimate experience with a smaller crowd of student and teachers.

Meant to be intense, the Knowledge Retreat is held for six days, either the week before or after the three-day conference. The number of participants varies between two and three hundred. It is a middle of the range programme—longer than a weekend conference, but less than programmes which run from three weeks to a year. For six days, participants from around the world retreat with six world-renowned religious teachers. This year, topics include Orientation and Advice for Seekers of Knowledge; Lessons from the Farewell Speech of the Prophet; al-Ghazālī’s text on Status and Ostentation; the Bible through a Muslim lens; Divine and Human love; Ahmad Zarruq’s text: Advice on the Spiritual Path; and Rethinking Spirituality. All the topics are addressed by men from Western countries of origin or Arab backgrounds.

This setting was inspired by Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah’s desire to see Muslims linking themselves more closely to the source of sacred knowledge, the Qur’ān. A legendary and world-renowned Mauritanian scholar, Bin Bayyah was previously a judge in the High Court of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the Head of Shari’ah. He is an instructor at the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and Deputy Head of the Union of Muslim Scholars. He has been called upon by the Obama administration and other governments to advise on issues of politics and religion as they relate to the Muslim world. Additionally, he has served on advisory panels of think tanks. Continuing the line of scholarship in his family, Bin Bayyah was trained in the religious sciences at some of the most traditional centres of religious learning in Mauritania, often purported to be where Arabic language is purest and where unadulterated traditional knowledge can still be found. He “has spoken at length about the endurance of the Islamic legal tradition and also written extensively on rulings for Muslims living as minorities in foreign lands” (Schleifer, 2013, p.

79). He is often accompanied by his most famous American student, Hamza Yusuf, who acts as his interpreter.

A daily regime of Qur'ānic recitation is encouraged during the programme. The volunteer tells the audience from the stage,

This morning, we had fajr prayer and after fajr, we read sūra Yaseen. And that will be our habit for the next six days. Fajr is at 7AM and we will read Yaseen together. Similarly, at the end of the session we'd like to recite sūra Al-Mulk.

The programme also attempts to give attendees the opportunity to engage face-to-face with the religious teachers, providing “a conducive environment for students to pursue their quest for knowledge and enlightenment by studying the traditional sciences preserved through a chain of transmission handed to us through great scholars of the past” (RIS website, n.d.). When I ask participants about their reasons for participating in the intensive learning environment, many attendees said they wanted to gain further knowledge, often using “spiritual” as an adjective. Others have sought time with these influential scholars to experience a “revival,” “recharge,” “renewal” or “uplift” their spiritual dispositions.

Breaking for the Holidays

For the pleasure of God and acquiring knowledge of His word, hundreds of Muslims braved the inclement weather four days before Christmas. The weather is preparing to deliver a cold and white day. It is precisely this closeness to the holiday and vacation time that allows Muslims from North America and other regions of the world to escape from the grind of the working week to downtown Toronto. While bulletins deliver the terrible news of homeless people and elderly folk dying in the streets or in their homes due to the lack of proper shelter or

heat, students hurry into the warm confines of the Royal York Hotel. They bring in the smell of the winter winds as they stand in line in the foyer of one of the lower levels of the hotel. Volunteers attending to the needs of participants behind a semicircle of tables just beyond the opening of the elevator bank. Green lanyards with “RIS Knowledge Retreat 2013/1435,” embossed in white, rest around their necks. A square card at the end of each lanyard, decorated with an intricate design of Arabesque similitude, displays each person’s name. The volunteers smile and hand out programme bags, crossing names off their lists as they go. Students quickly make their way into the lecture hall. It is the first day of the retreat and getting a good seat is a must.

At close to four in the afternoon, the programme is set to begin. Shaykh Abdulkarim Yahya, a convert of eight years and recently back from Tarim, Yemen, pulls out an iPad from a cloth bag and welcomes the audience with greetings of peace. He is dressed in a long white gown with a skull cap atop his head and sports a full beard with Malcolm X-like glasses—currently in vogue—resting on the bridge his nose. He sits on an erected stage in the front of the room that has been designed to give off an Arabian flair. It is fitted with small chairs and chaise-like benches. Two lamps of seemingly Middle Eastern design are positioned on the corners of the stage. A tall gold lattice framing stands in the back, swathed with chiffon fabrics crisscrossing one another, draped to the floor. Coloured lights shine upon them, creating the vision of an Arabian night. The audience is divided into four sections, the right and left designated for men and women, respectively, and the centre two for families. While the two outer sections remain gender segregated, the middle section is situated in front of the stage and therefore its front rows are coveted spots. It is consistently peppered with single men and women regardless of

their being with family members, given the good view one has of the stage and proximity to the teacher. Two large screens project the teacher's image to both sides of the room. The teacher begins with a prayer on Prophet Muhammad—*ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam* (peace be upon him)—and the phrase echoes in whispers across the audience. He continues a second recitation, this time stopping to translate the Arabic into English after each full thought. “I’ve been asked to give advice to seekers of knowledge. Seekers of knowledge is a great station,” he announces. He starts to describe some of the virtues of knowledge seekers:

The ink of the scholars is weightier than the blood of the martyrs on the Day of Judgement. The angels have lowered their wings for you. The fish seek your forgiveness⁹. Knowledge is the point of your and my existence. Knowledge is the point of the heavens and the earth. The heavens and the earth were created for one thing, that you and I would know. Not just any knowledge, that you would know Allah and his attributes, particularly his knowledge and power. What you are doing right now is our purpose. It’s a great thing. (Asim, lecture, 21 December 2013)

His forty-five-minute session wraps up, and the call to afternoon prayer is heard over the loudspeakers soon after. Students make their way out of the double doors of the large lecture room to adjourn to the small seminar room next door. The room has white sheets slanted on the floor in the direction of Makkah. A strip of space is left in the middle, separating the portion for the men to pray, in front of the women. Whilst the volunteer team attends to the needs of students—guiding them to the bathrooms, prayer areas, rooms to purchase food, and answering miscellaneous questions—they also manage the organisation’s daily presence on social media. Facebook and Twitter posts for the duration of the week include photos of the large audience,

⁹ Speaker is referencing the following hadith: "If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, God will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise. The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge. The inhabitants of the heavens and the Earth and (even) the fish in the deep waters will ask forgiveness for the learned man. The superiority of the learned over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave (no monetary inheritance), they leave only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion." Sunan of Abu-Dawood, Hadith 1631

small groups of students around specific teachers, photos of teachers speaking at the podium—captioned with a quote from their lecture—and the arrival of other speakers at the airport or in the hotel for the upcoming convention. This use of technology makes the learning environment public and private at the same time. The social media posts cause non-attendees from different parts of the world to express their dream and desire to one day attend such a gathering.

I take the opportunity to talk with people milling around whilst the group prayer is in session and thereafter. My inability to obtain an allocated time slot from the programme's administration to speak to the entire audience about my research requires that I make quick work of finding people to take part in my study. I pass out informed consent sheets and questionnaires to all willing. I meet a couple from Indonesia who have come to observe and learn about the issues of Muslims in the West. They tell me that many of the programmes in Indonesia have some political or sectarian affiliation. *"There's always some agenda associated with them. This programme is unique,"* the wife says. She highlights one of the perceived differences between Muslims in majority and minority contexts: a sense of autonomy from the machinations of political groups. Although some level of religious sectarianism exists within Muslim communities in the West, it fails to erupt into bouts of widespread violence as seen in many Muslim-majority countries. This presents a false sense of separation between political activity and Muslim individuals and organisations at large. However, many of the religious teachers at the Knowledge Retreat are often in conversation with their home government and individuals from governments abroad. This couple is not alone in their perception. Later in the day, I see two young men dragging their suitcases behind them, straight off a plane from Cairo. They too wanted to see how Muslims organised their communities in the West, with thoughts on

perhaps replicating the model in their own country. This is illustrative of the ways in which popular Western converts have become a source for knowledge over eastern individuals and institutions.

From Local Imam to International Scholar

As students settle back in their seats to await the start of the second session, Imam Zaid Shakir enters the room with his slow gait, dipping to one side as he walks. His tall frame— over six feet—is cloaked in a long white garb, the traditional dress of many men in Arab countries. As he walks through the aisle, escorted by two men, he leaves a trail of fragrance in his wake. Shakir, born Ricky Daryl Mitchell, tells me a bit of his life history, describing how he has gone from the ghettos of Connecticut to international religious stardom.

Originally of African, Irish, and Native American descent, he grew up in Pinnacle Heights, the second housing project built in New Britain, Connecticut. Shakir was raised in a Baptist household but admits to not having any strong religious practices. His mother was an activist who communicated her ideas about racial and social inequality in ways that put the family at odds with the Klu Klux Klan and other white supremacists. She would share the death threats with the children for them to understand the type of world in which they lived. Shakir's experiences—as a male of mixed descent and with the social problems of broken homes, alcoholism, drug abuse, as well as the ever present and unchecked police violence against African Americans—inspired a desire to search for answers, for some sort of solution to deal with the contempt and bitterness that he felt living as a racial minority. He says that he tried out communism and transcendental meditation for size, but it was in Islam that he found solace.

It had the spirituality of transcendental meditation through what we call "Dhikr" and Qur'ān recitation—things that are very soothing to the soul. But, it also had a social

activism component that transcendental meditation didn't have. It had the social activism of the communists, with God. (Shakir, Interview with Bill Moyers, Summer 2007).

After having dropped out of college following the death of his mother, and then joining the Air Force, Shakir converted to Islam in the late seventies, on Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. Embracing Islam would lead him on a long journey of intellectual study.

His love of reading increased after his conversion and he states that he read everything he could get his hands on, mostly in the form of books and leaflets, the main source of Islamic knowledge in the United States at the time. His initial introduction to Islam came at the hands of community members attached to the teachings of the Nation of Islam; he was influenced by some of its popular followers. He quotes Muhammad Ali, "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong," as the impetus for him seeking release from his army duties. The army rejected his request as there was no cause to object to war in which his unit was disengaged. However, still set on obtaining his discharge, he requested to be stationed in a Muslim country and was sent to Turkey. There he remained, mingling with a Hanafi community as well as members of a Naqshbandī Sufi community, for two and a half years.

In 1981, three years after his conversion, Shakir was discharged from the army and began intensive Arabic language studies at the American University in D.C., whilst also being enrolled at Georgetown University. After intensive study during a summer session and two more sessions in the autumn and spring semesters, Shakir acquired the equivalent of two years of university-level Arabic language study. After completing his undergraduate degree, he went on to complete a postgraduate degree in political science and international relations at Rutgers University. During his time in New Brunswick, he founded Masjid al-Huda, which later became the New Brunswick Islamic Centre. In New Jersey, during the mid-80s, Shakir recalls coming under the influence of

Salafism, while still being sympathetic towards the Iranian revolution. However, recognising the importance of knowing the Arabic language for a deeper exploration of the religious sciences, Shakir says he “went to Egypt for a year to really begin studying Arabic a bit more deeply, in a religious setting.”

He had his sights set on the renowned Al-Azhar University. However, unaware of the multiple stages one must complete in the Egyptian education system before applying, Shakir settled upon a language institute run by Al-Azhar. After 11 months of study, Shakir returned home to New Haven, Connecticut, where many of his siblings had relocated from New Britain. He started a mosque in a historically African-American neighbourhood, engaging in community outreach and preaching. Now equipped with a firmer footing in the Arabic language, he could read religious literature in both Arabic and English and begun transitioning into an authoritative source. “I kind of, by default, ended by being the Imam because I studied Arabic,” he says. It highlights the higher standing one is accorded within Muslim communities when one has knowledge of the language of the Qur’ān.

While serving in a salaried position as an imam, Shakir taught political science at a local state university and worked as a director of welfare at the Hamden, Connecticut welfare office. He was active in working with members of his community to provide after-school programmes for adults, in setting up drug-free zones near schools, and in organising neighbourhood patrols to decrease drug trafficking in the area.

Shakir admits that he had no grand ambitions of being a religious teacher. “I was just studying to try and understand my religion and practice it better. There were no aspirations. ‘I’m going to go back and be an imam’—that was not in the cards.” However, it set him on a course

that led him to be much more than a local imam. Shakir gave lectures in his local community and was invited to speak at different Muslim organisations around the country. It was during one of these speaking arrangements, in 1992, that he first came to hear of Hamza Yusuf, with whom he would later go on to have a much closer relationship. His choice to continue his study overseas points to a need to study in the Middle East to obtain knowledge and legitimacy. It should be noted that unlike the current Muslim religio-educational landscape in Muslim America, few sources, both in the terms of individuals and institutions, were available for structured learning. Shakir lived in Syria for six years and continued to Morocco for a year before his second return home in 2001, two months after the September 11 attacks. “It was a whole new world. Everything had changed,” he recalls.

Shakir begins a series of blessings upon Prophet Muhammad and greets the audience with the customary greetings of peace. He discusses lessons from the Farewell Speech of Prophet Muhammad, encouraging students to reflect on the legacy of the Prophet. When his lecture ends, he opens the floor for questions. These come straight from the audience via a roving microphone or pieces of paper collected by volunteer staff. For the brave, questions are asked directly of the teacher when he descends from the stage. Surprisingly, many of the questions are unrelated to the subject of his lecture. They are questions of opinion revolving around issues of *halal* and *haram*: music, machine slaughter of animals, taking interest in the Western economy, inoculations, and the like. Why this disparity? It is a question I put to Aftab Malik, a long-time student-companion of Abdullah bin Bayyah, Hamza Yusuf, and Zaid Shakir, and an informal advisor to the organisation.

People go to the scholars for everything and that’s a mistake because they are scholars of the law. A couple came to me and asked for marital advice and I was like ‘you need to go

see a marriage counsellor. It is okay, you can do this'. I said, 'you don't need to go to an 'ālim (scholar) for that because an 'ālim will give you the legal explanation. It's okay to use the social sciences. (A. Malik, personal communication, 26 December 2013)

He recognises the absurdity of it all. He explains,

You don't need to go to them for everything. When my car is broken I'm gonna go to a mechanic. When I've got a toothache, I'm going to go to a dentist. I'm not going to go ask an 'ālim about that. (A. Malik, personal communication, 26 December 2013)

Nonetheless, the delineation is blurred, and Malik empathises with his fellow religious adherents.

On one degree, a lot of people feel they are so unworthy they have to ask a religious person because it has some divine sanctification. Second degree, there is so much bewilderment that people have no idea what to do so they think we're gonna go and ask a religious person. The third thing is that what's happening now is that there a tendency to see everything through the prism of religion, which has never been the case. Historically you had scholars who were astronomers, astrophysics, mathematicians, you know...craftsman, so maybe you can ask multiple questions. (A. Malik, personal communication, 26 December 2013).

Malik puts the onus on lay Muslim to make the delineation between what is appropriate to ask a religious scholar and what is not. However, he fails to account for the scholarly proclivity to answer all questions put to them, despite many questions being outside of their religious remit. This illustrates how authority moves from the religious to the cultural, given the presence of the religious component. Shakir's teaching is not limited to these mass public events. In his own words, he sees his role as a varied one.

I work at Zaytuna College, which I helped to found, so that's one arena. I work with the Lighthouse masjid in Oakland, an inner-city masjid. That's another arena. I give classes at one of the suburban masjids. That's another arena. And then I have private students one-on-one on the phone, but that's been difficult the last few years. But when I first came back there were some people that we studied that way for years. So, there are different venues or vistas of engagement and each one has its own requisites. There's no one size fit all, style or method of teaching...reading from a text, word for word, and just correcting, that's one way. A public lecture, a khutbah...is another way. Public class in a

masjid is another way. And each one has its own requisites and styles and demands and challenges. (Z. Shakir, personal communication, 18 August 2014)

Shakir maintains his relevance through an engagement with audiences in a variety of spaces and responds to the needs of each of the specific environments. This agility enables him to demonstrate his authority on multiple levels, such as it relates to texts and institutions.

Purifying the Heart

As the evening draws near, the stage glows softly. Candles behind the lattice screens radiate through the red fabric draped on the frames. Habib Ali al-Jifri, the last speaker of the day, enters the room with his entourage in a flurry of commotion. He carries a staff in his hand; it silently pushes into the plush carpet. “A fashion statement,” I hear someone quip, highlighting one of the many ways in which authority is performative—possibly similar to Shakir’s wearing of traditional Arab dress. Even so, about fifteen people, mostly women, of the large audience stand for his entrance. “As a Ba’Alawi Sufi, Al-Jifri is part of a tradition that has been based in Yemen for approximately 800 years and traces back to the Prophet Muhammad” (Schleifer, 2013, p. 88) through the family of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad, and the last of the four rightly guided caliphs. The programme booklet notes that Al-Jifri’s has a “classical Islamic education from the illustrious scholars of Hadramawt, embodying a methodology which crystallizes the middle way of Islam, Islamic Jurisprudence, a respect for the differences between jurists and a spiritual education drawn from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.” As he is unable to communicate fluently in English, his interpreter Shaykh Yahya, from earlier in the day, ascends the stage behind him. It would be misleading to read the presence of the interpreter as evidence of Al-Jifri being ignorant of the English language. At many instances during his lecture, Al-Jifri

repeats serious points for the interpreter to point out subtleties of the language, causing the audience to laugh as he corrects the interpreter's choice words, in Arabic and sometimes even in English, ensuring that his points are communicated effectively. He and his interpreter hold a book in their hands—which, on the last digit of the right hand, are adorned by a silver ring with a coloured stone in the centre, a tribute to a practice of Prophet Muhammad¹⁰. The book is the twenty-eighth volume al-Ghazālī's oeuvre, his magnum opus, *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), on 'Condemning Status and Ostentation'. After giving praise to Prophet Muhammad, Al-Jifri talks about the importance of the topic.

It is the most dangerous affliction that the believer can have. The Prophet - ṣalla Allāh 'alayhi wa-sallam called it the hidden shirk (associating partners with God). While it doesn't remove one from the religion like greater shirk...it becomes subtler as it goes on. (H.A. Jifri, lecture, 22 December 2013).

Before beginning the text, he asks for a moment of pause for everyone to correct their intentions. "Why are we here? We want to renew our intention...You are seeking knowledge for God and we will act on it and teach others, purifying the souls, cleansings the hearts," he reminds students. He closes his eyes for a few seconds. All is quiet. A moment later, his eyes open and he begins. He asserts that "the light of this knowledge settles in your heart" and as a result should manifest in one's behaviour. "We learn this knowledge so that we use it for ourselves, not so we can categorise others and judge them," he says. Al-Jifri ends by advising students to develop the habit of having the name of Allah on their tongues. He opens his hands,

¹⁰ A discrepancy exists on which hand it should be worn, while it is most agreed that it should be the little finger. Anas ibn Malik reports that "the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) wore a silver ring on his right hand which had an Abyssinian stone in it, and he would keep its stone towards the palm." (Sahih Muslim, no: 2094); Anas ibn Malik says: "The ring of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) was on this", and he pointed towards the little finger of his left hand." (Sahih Muslim, no: 2095)

previously joined together at the level of his chest, palms up towards the ceiling, and rocks back and forth as he leads the audience in an ending prayer. “Given the snow storm and those who have lost power, take a few minutes to turn to Allah to ask him to alleviate the storm and problems for the people of this town,” he encourages. Al-Jifri emphasises that Allah shows mercy not only to Muslims but to everyone on earth. The Muslim-majority world isn’t far from his thoughts as he mentions problems in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt. His choice of countries exemplifies the attention given to Arab Muslims to the exclusion of other non-Arab Muslim majority countries, let alone North America where he is teaching. This highlights the locale to which teachers direct their attention, even while they attempt to reconfigure tradition for Western audience. It suggests an assumption of a presumed centre from which authenticity is derived.

As Al-Jifri descends from the stage and makes his way to leave the hall, he’s mobbed by students wishing to shake or kiss his hand. I turn away from the crowd in order to note the seen and unseen and watch as a young man makes his way to the front of the room, in the opposite direction of his peers. He picks up Al-Jifri’s glass from the table and drinks the water that remains in it: an act practiced at the time of Prophet Muhammad by his companions who sought to gain God’s blessings, given the Prophet’s proximity to God. It demonstrates the continued practice and extent to which some students seek benefit from their teachers.

Cultural Knowledge and Beyond

When Hamza Yusuf takes the stage days later, the stress he places on the importance of knowledge and learned people is clear. His lectures revolve around a classical text on advice to those on the spiritual path. As a neo-traditionalist whose objective is to revive the idea of

studying traditional Islamic sciences through a chain of transmission, Yusuf has been at the forefront of developing educational projects for American Muslims for the past two decades. His biographical summary in the programme booklet leaves out his educational background and instead lists his professional accomplishments and affiliations, both nationally and internationally.

Born Mark Hanson in 1960, Yusuf was raised in a Greek-Orthodox Christian family in Santa Barbara, California. He and his seven siblings trace their lineage back to Irish, Scottish, and Greek origins. His father was a university professor and his mother attended the University of Berkley. She partook in the social activism activities that occurred in the 1960s, while the nation was experiencing a civil rights movement. This combination informed Yusuf's knowledge of American history as well as his love of reading. In a video interview, his mother would later recall that he was an extremely inquisitive child.

Available information regarding the circumstances around his conversion mention a near-fatal car accident having triggered an inquest into what happens after death. He found answers in narrations from Prophet Muhammad and a few months shy of his 18th birthday, in 1977, Hanson converted to Islam. Biographical information available online mentions that he knew he wanted to learn Islam from the root, the Arabic sources. Consequently, he travelled to Norwich, England in 1979 to study Arabic. Narrations on Yusuf's time in England are sketchy. The most detail is mentioned by Yuskaev (2010), who states that Yusuf's trip was prompted by meeting followers of Ian Dallas, also known as Abdalqadir as-Sufi, a Scottish convert to Islam and spiritual leader of the Darqawa Sufi order and the Murabitun World Movement. Other sources state that Yusuf's chance meeting with an older Emirati man in London facilitated the formal beginnings of

this knowledge-journey. After less than a year in England, Yusuf relocated to the United Arab Emirates. He remained in the city of Al-Ain for four years, studying the Islamic sciences. After this, Yusuf left the Emirates and made his way to Mauritania. He would later write about meeting his teacher and the impact it had on him.

As we came into Tuwamirat, I was completely overwhelmed by its ethereal quality. It was the quintessential place that time forgot. The entire scene reminded me of something out of the Old Testament. Many of the people had never seen a white person before and the younger people had only heard about the French occupation but never seen French people or other foreigners for that matter. I entered the tent of Murabit al-Hajj. My eyes fell upon the most noble and majestic person I have ever seen in my life. He called me over, put his hand on my shoulder, welcomed me warmly, and then asked me, "Is it like the dream?" I burst into a flood of tears. I had indeed experienced a dream with him that was very similar to our actual meeting (H. Yusuf, *Another Mother of the Believer*, 2009).

Yusuf lived a Bedouin life for the next five years, studying Islamic sciences with Murabit al-Hajj. Perhaps most important was his acquisition of the Arabic language from the tongue of the Bedouins, often considered by religious teachers to be untarnished by the modern world. Then, after close to ten years studying with teachers in countries spanning North Africa, West Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf, Yusuf returned to California in 1988. He later went on to complete an undergraduate degree in religious studies from San Jose State University in California and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree.

Many students I speak with at the Knowledge Retreat identify Yusuf as one of their sources for Islamic knowledge. When I speak with anyone who has met or learned from him, their comments about him are given a prophetic tone of attribution. As one of his students, now a teacher, remarks, "We didn't only learn religion from Shaykh Hamza...he taught us how to live." He is a guide to his students inasmuch as others of his stature, centuries before him were to their community, going back to the time of Prophet Muhammad. This is reminiscent of a

Qur'ānic verse that tells of Prophet Muhammad's status as an exemplary model for Muslims:

"The Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often."¹¹ Researchers such as Mandaville (2014) posit that this may be because Yusuf "addresses themes of spiritual vitality, religious consciousness, and multiple identities through allegory and metaphor" (p. 484), beyond his obvious comfort with American literature and popular culture. Yuskaev (2013) and Jones (2012) consider him and his peers as "cultural translator[s]" or "culture broker[s]" in the modern and medieval periods, respectively, who shape the interpretative authority in American Muslim domains. Like his teacher Bin Bayyah, he contributes to political activities and contributes to public policy discussions with the American government. Most notable was his visit to the White House during the Bush Administration in 2001, after the 11 September attacks.

During the *Knowledge Retreat*, Yusuf talks about challenges teachers now face.

It is very difficult to get people to be present. Teachers now are trained to be entertaining—infotainment, we have an app. We are trivial. We live in a trivial world. Towards the end of time, the intellect would be removed from people...You are losing the purpose of why you are here. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 24 December 2013).

Though he doesn't lecture in a manner that results in students erupting into peals of laughter, Yusuf does offer an application for mobile devices, which house his lectures and writings. Yet, he continues, elaborating on why we are here and using the womb of the mother as a metaphor to explain the purpose of creation, "...human beings are travellers, the journey begins in the womb of the mothers." Their purpose is to cultivate the earth, the civilisation of the world and to be a steward of the world. "We learn the wrong things. We don't see through the illusion of the

¹¹ Sūrat al-Aḥzāb 33, āyah 21

world. We don't see the wool being pulled over our eyes. People have been bewitched," he states in an unfortunate tone. This points to his characterisation of the condition of the world, and Muslim communities, as being a result of an intellectual deficiency.

I came to realise it's an intellectual problem. An intellectual crisis that can only be resolved by understanding what the true nature of the intellect is—it's a spiritual purpose. The child doesn't come into the world with a developed intellect. The result of that development of the child's mind is called empathy; in our culture, it is called *rahma* (mercy). English is a very rich language, undeniably, but it is nowhere near as rich as Arabic in its metaphysical implications. Arabic is a language that when you go into it in a deep level, it reveals realities about the nature of the world about itself. Heidegger thought that Greek did this, but I don't think it's the same as Arabic. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 22 December 2013)

Yusuf first argues that Muslims have an intellectual problem, which he determines is due to spiritual deficiency. He then highlights language skills as a vital element for intellectual development and elevates the Arabic language over his own native language and that of his audience. In doing so, he places himself as a deliverer of spiritual intellect and gives the Arabic language the highest rank of value, above language such as Farsi, which has contributed to the historical development of Islamic thought in the same centuries from which Yusuf draws much of his own guidance. This gives him an elevated status, given his dexterity with the language, and contributes to the maintenance of his own authority.

Like Al-Jifri's choice of text, Yusuf refers to the writings and behaviour of al-Ghazālī and his own teachers.

Imam Al-Ghazālī wrote seven books on logic. Seven. And logic was one of the most important subjects in the Islamic world. It's still studied in some traditional madrasa[s]. Mauritania still studies logic. My own teacher was a master of logic...and Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah, this is one of his areas of mastery. He mastered traditional logic and he's constantly reasoning in that way...he doesn't debate but whenever he presents his arguments, he presents them in the most formal way. Because he understands how to argue. And now we have Muslims arguing on the Internet. They don't know any of these things. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 26 December 2013)

Yusuf continues, connecting his understanding of the text to his previous focus on language and what occurs in online spaces amongst people who speak on behalf of Islam.

Language is important, grammar is important. One of the things about text[ing] is that we are reducing a whole civilisation into an idiotic level of communication. If you look at texts now, people don't use any grammar. It's the most basic communication. It's like chimpanzee's communication. And this is a very dangerous time. Because people will be habituated to communicating like this, and over time this is how people will end up speaking. And if you don't learn grammar you won't know the subtleties of communication. You won't be able to understand things in subtle ways. It will all be simplistic. It used to be, people who didn't know a language just knew they were ignorant. But now everyone thinks they know. And this is what the Prophet said...just look at the Internet. And what's interesting about the Internet, if you ever scroll down and read comments, intelligent comments are always written with grammatically correct language and stupid comments are always misspelled and poorly written. I'm not making that up. People can't even spell and you've got an opinion? ...There's nothing wrong with having an opinion but do the work necessary to have an opinion. Because in Islam, not everyone is entitled to their opinion...If you put in the time to learn, you will be honoured, but if you don't put in the time, then you should just keep your mouth silent. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 25 December 2013).

Yusuf is reminding students of knowledge and who should be allowed to speak within the public domain on issues related to the religion, while inflecting his speech with a tone of crisis, to which he is attending. He moves into a discussion on knowledge and historical subjects of study and slides back into the modern context once again.

The nature of knowledge is two. You have quality and quantity. Quality is language, quantity is number. You have literacy and numeracy. And you need numerate societies. You need people who understand, especially in this age we've been manipulated with numbers and statistics all the time. So, understanding these two are very important, to have a qualitative education and have a quantitative education. Historically, in the Muslim world and other worlds, when you finished mastering these subjects then you went on to study in three schools. They have a school, in the Muslim world, they have the school of studying fiqh, shari'ah, [and] theology. So, you have people who focus on these Islamic sciences and then you have people that study medicine. And people that theology and what came to be known as *taşawwuf* what we would call today psychology, spiritual psychology... (H. Yusuf, lecture, 25 December 2013)

Yusuf then seamlessly moves into a presentation about Zaytuna College, the higher education institution he has co-founded. Although he spends time outlining what students will gain from the B.A. programme at his institution, what he considers the best way to gain from the Western and Islamic intellectual tradition. He also uses the opportunity to discuss the architecture of the building, linking it to a history of magnificently built, visually appealing institutions in Muslim-majority countries. However, he goes further and comments on the absence of this beauty from present-day Muslim individuals and by extension their architecture and lays down an indictment on current behavioural norms.

It's very beautiful architecturally. Consistent with our commitment to presenting Islam as a beautiful thing. Because Muslims, wherever they went, they always made their culture beautiful. Their clothes were beautiful, their food was beautiful, their buildings and architecture were beautiful...the architecture of the mosques and madrasa. So, this is a hallmark of the Muslim. That they were...people who make things beautiful. And that's what we need to restore in our community. I think a lot of our women still dress beautifully. I think the men, especially the *shabāb* (young men) need to stop wearing underwear in public. T-shirts are underwear. They're not meant to be worn. And Muslims historically would have never done those things. They understood what a caliph is, so they always had clothes that represented the caliphate. They always wore beautiful clothes. Men wore beautiful clothes...Amazing. Peasants in the Muslim world dress like princes and now we have princes dressed like peasants. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 25 December 2013)

Yusuf projects a one-dimensional view of Sunni Islamic artistic history and suggests that Muslims, historically, have had a monopoly on making beautiful things—as though, perhaps, other faith communities, or those of no faith, are unable to produce beauty in the world. Yusuf's continuous reference of the past comes off as, what I termed to Aftab Malik, romantic – a glorification of a bygone era that contained the true spirit of the faith. Yusuf's selection of what he sees as the positive and beautiful aspects of Muslim societies and civilisation—ones that his audience can feel proud of—presents an essentialised view of these histories. Yusuf elects not to mention

narratives that run counter to this version, presenting an imbalanced view of history. Malik corrects what he sees as my negative attribution to Yusuf's characterisations.

I think the important word you used is romanticism. You don't understand. There is a romanticist appeal, but at the same time, these scholars are very realist. They know that...like, look...have you seen Indiana Jones? I describe it like Indiana Jones. You know these scholars were at that period of time where they saw the last remnants of living Islam. And you know so...you have Indiana going into Egypt and you have all these...its really quaint, isn't it? It's amazing...but then it's all changed and you fast forward and we're in modernity. So, this is the reason why sometimes they speak and you feel it's because they have seen something we only read about in books. So why wouldn't they be romantic about it? But when they speak...you see, like when I speak about my teachers it comes across romantic in a sense because it's ideal. It's the only thing I want to do, but realistically I can't. This is why I'm here in the world. So, we should allow them to do that but what happens is that a lot of researchers and someone just did it with Shaykh Hamza, they don't know them. I spent 18 years with him. Like literally, so I think I've got a good understanding. He's not a romanticist in that sense at all. He's a realist in the sense that this is the world...it's a place of toil and tribulation but he's a human being. So, there are moments he'll focus on when I was in Mauritania.... but Mauritania is not the world. And he would advise you, don't go to Mauritania. So, you know, this is the thing. People will take glimpses in a lecture of like six hours, then people will say oh he's harkening back to a romantic...he's not...that's his *bashariyya* (human nature). (A. Malik, personal communication, 26 December 2013)

Malik's description further projects this view of an essentialised Islam by providing an example that characterises the learning process as one of archaeological excavation, covered with imperialist and patriarchal dust, exhibited by white men going into the land of the 'other'. His reference to the last "remnants of living Islam" imply a point in time that Yusuf and his peers had access to that no longer exists; a time when people were living as Muslims in the way God intended, without the influence of the normal vicissitudes of social life in any given context—an anachronistic assumption. Furthermore, the point in time he refers to is quite "modern" itself. However, he links it back to a textual history, one I can only assume is meant to reference the time of Prophet Muhammad and his companions or the righteous generation after him, or after

them. One which historians have documented as being far from any idyllic representation of utopic life of Muslims within Islamic histories.

A Visible Social Presence

Tariq Ramadan is one of two European religious teachers often in attendance at RIS. When he enters the hall for the first time, dressed in a suit and a white dress shirt open at the collar, his wife and daughter are beside him. He is waylaid on his way to his seat as men from the audience stand to shake his hand and get a quick word in. He is not scheduled to speak until much later, so he settles into a seat at the back of the hall. He lifts a pair of reading glasses, hanging from a string around his neck, to the bridge of his nose. His eyes are trained on an iPad in his hands, his fingers typing on it from time to time. A substantial number of the programme's participants with whom I spoke cite Ramadan as a source for Islamic knowledge. As a current professor in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, Ramadan is considered "Europe's preeminent Muslim intellectual author about Islam in public life" (RISSC, 2016, p. 99). Mandaville (2014) describes him as "the scholar activist". As one participant says, "He is relevant, blunt, and gives us a guilt trip. [He] shows us our complicity in what is going on in society." The programme booklet highlights his academic credentials: an M.A. in Philosophy and French literature and Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Geneva, along with his classical training in Cairo, Egypt where he is said to have received one-on-one intensive training in classical Islamic scholarship from Al-Azhar University scholars in seven disciplines. His family background also looms large, as Ramadan is the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Established in 1928 in Egypt, soon after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, the Muslim Brotherhood was created in a time wherein Muslim thinkers felt that

“Muslims had to rediscover the living force of their religious teachings, to develop a critical outlook, and to free themselves from the alienation produced by colonialism” (Ramadan, 2012, p. 70). In his own writings, Ramadan comments on the early formation of the Muslim Brotherhood, “...which saw itself as a Sufi order as much as a solitary-based social and educational organisation, without defining itself as a political party” (Ramadan, 2012, p. 70). Thus, Ramadan’s writings argue that the strategy of non-violent movements, such as the Brotherhood, were based on “...a strategy of reform from the bottom up (educating the masses), the aim of which was to transform the ‘top’ (reform society and change the structure of the state)” (Ramadan, 2012, p. 73). This approach serves as a vital background to understand the demands Ramadan makes of students. iPad in hand, Ramadan ascends the stage to address the topic “Rethinking of Spirituality.”

The tradition is read...the past, in order to be equipped to deal with the present. Everything is about balancing. You can have a deep spirituality but have a social presence...one that is attentive to a deep connection with God that manifests itself in personal change, but visible social and political engagement. (T. Ramadan, lecture, 25 December 2013)

His start suggests the presence of a fixed notion of tradition in the past that is used to provide one with tools for present-day engagement. Simultaneously, the idea of spirituality seems to sit outside of notions related to social justice rather than within them. However, based on his writings, Ramadan seems to advocate a reconfiguration of tradition which is an action-oriented social pedagogical project infused with an Islamic ethos. His development of the term *dar-ul-shahadah*, the abode of testimony, describes a testimony before God which signals one’s entrance into the Islamic belief system, and the Muslim’s responsibility towards humankind—in belief and function. In his books, Ramadan stress that this orientation “allows the identity and

social responsibility of Muslims to be both expressed and linked” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 75). Therefore, *dar-ul-shahadah* is “an environment in which Muslims are brought back to the fundamental teaching of Islam and invited to mediate on their role” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 77). As in other venues, his time at the Knowledge Retreat is an opportunity to communicate this message to the Muslim public. “We should be witnesses. Our spiritual freedom should be vocal. If I don't talk about tyrants then that means that silently, I'm complicity accepting them,” he admonishes during his lecture. Ramadan presents a typology of solidarity that encompasses the physical, intellectual, and psychological. He brusquely critiques Yusuf's points of focus without referring to him by name. He takes issue with the preoccupation with beautiful speech and lots of knowledge decoupled from action. “We need not focus so much on how eloquent people say things...We should come with a sense of dignity...Stop spreading your message through your talk, rather do so by serving,” he suggests. Although it is without a doubt that Ramadan sees the importance of acquiring knowledge, he tells students that it must be linked to action.

Islam is about knowledge, very good. What is your relationship with people in jail? Do we help them? Is there education solidarity? Until when will you say I'm ignorant? We can't keep saying we are not equipped. At least do with what you have. (T. Ramadan, lecture, 25 December 2013)

He pushes further with his typology and the purported crises of Muslim communities at large, and what he concludes is a sense of insecurity.

Yes, we are facing a crisis of knowledge, but we don't trust ourselves. We want to please our fellow citizens. A lack of trust. We need to have something in the community where we get back the trust. Psychological solidarity. Even in Bukhari ¹²that he was so scared of being wrong that he thought about his missing something...that he thought of ending everything. How do we know that? Because they dared to think about what they were feeling without being scared of being judged. You need to trust the people...I'm going to

¹² Imam al-Bukhari was as a Persian scholar who authored the hadith collection known as Sahih al-Bukhari, regarded by Sunni Muslims as one of the most authentic hadith collections

listen and I'm not going to judge. Only because I know who I am. Psychological solidarity is to be able to talk about what is not going right. (T. Ramadan, lecture, 25 December 2013)

It is important to note that the audience is diverse. However, based on my own findings, the majority are from South Asian and Arab origins. This focus on insecurity and failure to speak out against injustice neglects to consider the activities of generations of black Americans who have indeed been engaged in civil struggle for decades. It is perhaps an immigrant ear which he seeks to address.

In the end, Ramadan pleads with the audience to move beyond their superficial acceptance of the word of religious scholars.

You don't follow. You should follow a scholar because the knowledge he gives you to be free autonomous Muslims...Your spiritual journey should be visible. You have a mission to yourself and the world by reading the text...[O]nly by being in the middle are you achieving your mission on Earth. You're not here only for yourself. I see too many students—they like the setting here and elsewhere because it's a good commitment to change myself. It's still selfish. Myself. My job. My money. My trouble. Islam is yourself, your liberation, and you serving the people. And to serve the people, it needs determination, it needs commitment. (T. Ramadan, lecture, 25 December 2013)

This commitment is reflected in Malik's comments, a gatekeeper and my advocate for access to RIS. He adopts the term *adamic* as used by Dr T.J. Winter, also known as Shaykh Abdul Hakim Murad, and explains:

So, the idea is, people who leave these retreats are not being told, you are great scholars, you're *'ālims*, no. This is the beginning. This is what knowledge is like. And you ask, how do you transform? Knowledge transforms you. The idea is that knowledge...that once you internalise it, it makes you transform. To be better. This is what I said early on. The idea is throughout your whole life...your whole life is a struggle to become *adamic* (like Adam) human beings. How do you do that? Through struggle. I think an *adamic* human being is in equilibrium with everything. In equilibrium with his Lord. In equilibrium with nature. Equilibrium with other human beings. That is what it is to be a true *adamic* human being. We want people who are *adamic* human beings, why? Because they will have a greater impact on society. There will be great justice. Hopefully, they will be wise individuals, but

more importantly, they have compassion and mercy. (A. Malik, personal communication, 26 December 2013)

Malik posits that religious teachers can disinter traits attributed to Adam, not Prophet Muhammad, and guide Muslims towards the embodiment of these traits. Ramadan's call is a move past what he sees as a selfish desire to be *adamic* through a process of self-refinement, problematic due to its aim to effect change as a matter of consequence, obviating the need for direct social engagement.

Conclusion

As a constructed learning environment outside of a historically resonant location, RIS makes a concerted effort to imbue the space with an eastern aesthetic, demonstrating the importance put on representation of Islam from certain parts of the world and the ways in which authority is borrowed from physical environments. It facilitates a potential re-imagination of an environment different from the norm of students. The daily ritual activities in which students are encouraged to participate are an attempt to instil a routine of reflection that they can continue when they return home. Formally, in daily lectures many teachers elect to use classical texts, enabling students to get a taste of classical learning exemplified by the teacher-text-student relationship. This shows how authority lies within the understanding of tradition that teachers have expressed. This is also seen from teachers who do not use a text but implicitly rely on elements from their biographies to call for a mode of practice that moves beyond the personal, so that their knowledge informs the explicit actions related to social justice. Whilst Shakir's focus is on the lessons one can derive from Prophet Muhammad's last speech to his community, there is a reliance on texts from Muslim thinkers in the centuries thereafter, which provide a gateway to understanding how one should be in the world.

Teachers' biographies illustrate the role of teaching licenses as qualifications, and a knowledge of the Arabic language, as well as connections with popular Muslim scholars of the past, as elements used to convey authority. In addition, these biographies demonstrate the role of a secular university degree in supplementing teaching licenses. The pedagogical technique of teachers shifting back and forth between the past and present reveals how teachers use certain bodies of knowledge and their understanding of the social context to encourage the development of a Muslim self that remains true to a historical legacy in the modern context. It highlights the need for cultural knowledge and its relevant application and demonstrates different ways in which coherency around Islamic tradition is maintained. Teachers use this knowledge to impress upon students to reflect on their own lives and develop social practices that are imbued with what they see as the essential spirit of Islam.

CHAPTER 5: 'RIHLA'—THE JOURNEY

Manahil: A Portrait

Manahil is a twenty-six-year-old Texan of Pakistani heritage. She comes from a family which she characterises as “moderately Muslim,” with parents who didn’t “stress us out that much,” she says. She compares herself to her Muslim peers, families she describes as less moderate—putting a barrier between them and their non-Muslim peers.

I think their families were like you’re Muslim, you’re Muslim. They’re Christian, they’re Christian. So, I saw that and...I saw them kind of struggling within high school because I think their parents were like this is us, this is them. You still have to go to school with them. And I’m sure that created some sort of war within them.

Manahil says her parents aligned their family with Indian families who had the same cultural values as they did, even though their religious subjectivities were dissimilar. She highlights the elements her mother found acceptable from their Indian friends. No boyfriends. Good education. No pork. No alcohol. Unequipped with detailed knowledge of the multiple dimensions of legal rulings, Manahil’s parents, like many Muslims parents, focused on teaching their children good morals and values, which may be a mixture of both ethnic culture and religious mores. “We grow up with just the culture stuff, like being modest, and not eating *haram* [food], not drinking alcohol, being good to your parents,” she comments. For Manahil and many other young Muslims, it’s an unintelligible life manual.

I feel like Pakistanis... just pay attention to rules, rules, rules, but if you go a step higher then it’s like what’s the understanding of the rules. Let’s go a bit more. Let’s figure out what the culture was at the time when Islam was established. We don’t think like that.

Manahil’s mother was responsible for her religious upbringing, she says. She beams with pride when she reflects on her childhood memories.

I just remember she used to tell us stories. Where I live we have... a [religious] school, which would be Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. She used to drive us there and we’d have homework. And she was really involved in that sense. And then on the weekend we would sit down she would tell us stories [about] the Prophet (peace be upon him) just good stories, like folktales too. Like Pakistani folktales.

“She did an excellent job,” Manahil says. Her father, though present, played a more indirect role in her upbringing. “We are an immigrant family, so he was working. He was working like no one’s business, which today I understand. It showed me good work ethic if anything.”

Working as a therapist in a men’s prison imposes a heavy burden upon Manahil, day in and day out. Her life reached a boiling point, given the stress of her work environment and a recent breakup with a young man she hoped to marry. “I felt like I was having a really hard time coping and dealing with my issues,” she says. She turned to religion as a source of comfort, and to search for answers to help handle her difficulties. First stop: YouTube. Manahil says she entered keywords that related to what she was experiencing at the time—patience, destiny, gender roles.

I was hurting, but it made it bearable because it was close to studying Islam. I grew up as a Muslim, so I was really convenient for me to pray and have those things, but as far as education, I felt like I never understood the history; the dynamics of Islam as it was being established. So I looked into that. And I found a lot of good answers, a lot of good information.

Her search also helped her find answers to challenges she faced at work. She recalls a day when a client of one of her colleagues, named Jesus, was acting awkward towards her when she spoke with him while he was waiting to be attended to. After his session ended, she went to her colleague to ask if everything was alright. He told her that the client knew she was Muslim and felt uncomfortable. “I’m like, oh my God, let me tell you! Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, is mentioned more than the prophet [Muhammad], peace be upon him, in our Qur’ān,” she recalls saying to him, “in a good, assertive yet friendly way.” She continues,

...Jesus has a lot of respect in our faith, he’s even mentioned [many] times in our actual book. So, you know, you just kind of plant that seed. So, they’re like wow okay, Muslims aren’t just those people you see on TV, in the mountains, they’re actually people who are interacting and how Jesus has so much respect that he’s mentioned more times than their own prophet. So yeah, any opportunity like that. I don’t think I would have done that if I wasn’t educated. My parents didn’t tell me that Jesus was mentioned more times than the prophet, YouTube did.

During her online search, the teacher who stood out was Hamza Yusuf. “He was just so informative and not demeaning. And he was so peaceful. And go with the flow. And this is life. So, then my focus was on Hamza Yusuf and the way he taught,” she says. After a while, YouTube

lost its utility. Manahil explored online courses but felt they were inadequate. “I don’t want to do busy work. I want an interaction model,” she states. From Yusuf, she learned about the *Rihla* programme and was determined to attend. “I’m going to do it! I need this. I want to be an educated Muslim. I want to be a mature Muslim and I think it helps me,” she recalls saying to herself. Both the gaps in her childhood education and the challenges she confronts in her professional environment serve as impetus for her to search for relevant religious knowledge.

The dates aligned with the number of days leave she could request from work, and money was no obstacle. Manahil jumped at the chance. “When I got my acceptance letter, I was like heck yea I’m going! That fire never died. I hope it never dies. I think studying Islam, studying religion, there is no way it can lead you astray,” she says, smiling. However, her parents didn’t see it that way. She failed to disclose to them that she had applied to leave the country and study Islam. Only after paying the non-refundable tuition did she inform them, confident that the \$3,500 she had paid would prevent them from thwarting her plans. They didn’t understand why she needed to go from Texas to Turkey to learn Islam. They told her they would teach her whatever she wanted to know. “I don’t think that’s going to happen,” she told them. It was precisely the gaps in her home education that Manahil sought to fill. She sees her time at *Rihla* as a preparation for the adult years ahead.

When I do get older, I want to find a mate and I want to go back to my religion. When I invest, I want to make sure I’m investing money that’s not investing in non-Islamic activity like pornography or alcohol. When I give *zakat* (alms), I want to make sure I’m giving correct *zakat*. Just raising children and finances. I want to learn all of that that I did not get from my parents.

The location of the intensive learning environment is also attractive, given the distance from familiarity. She sees traces of Islamic civilisation on the streets she walks upon and in the architecture around her.

It’s away from this Western society. You see how this world lives and how modesty is just excellent and how you sell stuff. We went to the shops and I saw the beautiful long dresses and I’m like, wow! You would never see this in America. So, you see how Islam is promoted within this culture. It’s excellent, it’s just so great.

It is interesting that Manahil doesn’t see Turkey as Western and projects an Orientalist lens onto the environment, rather than two different Western cities. Manahil sees these experiences as

contributing to the development of her Muslim identity, connecting her to a history of Muslim peoples across time and space.

I think the number one thing is that I get a sense of connection. I'm not just some person. I feel like Westerners are always kind of like I'm just walking this earth alone. I'm trying to figure myself out. But for me, I feel different because I have this connection with these people, because they share the same faith. So, for me, it makes me understand that I've been on this Earth, but so have my ancestors and they've been telling these stories and I have to tell these stories because this is my connection to this small time I have on Earth. I think it is something I hold personally to myself. It gives me a sense of being...It gives me sense of identity and security in this world. I feel like I can connect it to these stories and this religion. It makes me a person that has meaning versus trying to create meaning out of nothing.

While this educational endeavour is very much for personal development, Manahil's ambition is to develop and become a resource for future generations.

I have all this information, I'm just adding on to it and passing it on. I think it's very important. It's important I know this now, so I can give this to my next generation as a gift, so they don't have to wander the streets of Houston, Texas wondering, 'where did I come from?'

Moreover, Manahil's motivations extend beyond her family and her Muslim community. She expresses indignation towards people who generalise by making false claims about her faith.

I work in a prison! How are you going to tell me my religion oppresses me when I work with men, talk to men? I'm in a setting where I'm very vulnerable. I'm working with criminals. How dare you tell me my religion says I can't do this?! I've gotten educated. I've gotten licensed. So, don't say my religion is not okay with me working because it's perfectly fine. I hate that. Just being a woman, not only being Muslim but being a female Muslim in America. Just being that double minority. Not only are you a minority, you're also female. So, it's like a double downer.

She isolates one of the varied challenges that Muslim women face in America, being one of the main topics of discussion amongst different groups of people who highlight deep seated patriarchy. This is what she perceives as the biggest challenge for American Muslims, the way the media portrays people of her faith: ignorant, violent, and oppressed.

I hate the stereotypes. I hate people thinking that I have no rights. That Muslims are violent. I don't like that one bit. Yeah, especially the violent part, because anything that happens in the media...if it's Muslim or someone of Islam, and [it's] their own interpretation, it's just magnified. It's like this big when it's just like that one person.

Manahil aims to use the knowledge she gains at *Rihla* to counter the impact of negative stereotypes in her community. She sees herself as an advocate, providing clarity on issues that are often misinterpreted, but also as developing confidence in her Muslim identity.

Being so young, I didn't feel comfortable saying, no you shouldn't do that...I didn't want to be that one person. So sometimes I would be insecure about that. But after going to this *Rihla*, just being more confident in what I'm giving. Giving backup hadiths, you know, like the Prophet (peace be upon him) would never say this. So just be confident with getting information but also spread that information whenever it's appropriate. Don't be the *haram* police, but just you know...this is us.

This "us" refers to American Muslims. Manahil explains what she sees is the role of the youth. "The young people who are seeking this knowledge are the one who are saving this religion. It's as simple as that. If not, it would be the people in the mountains," she concludes.

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Living and working in a professional environment as a young Muslim woman, Manahil is not on a path of religious scholarship. She is searching for religious knowledge to move beyond the limitations of her home and Sunday school education so that she can develop confidence in her faith and contribute to her Muslim community and society. Despite the sense of indigeneity Manahil seems to express in being a Texan, she articulates a desire to connect herself to a tradition of people unlike “Westerners” who are bereft of what she sees as any sort of rich history. The programme’s historically resonant location introduces students to the history of Rumi in the city Konya, where he developed as a leading Muslim thinker. The three-week sojourn aims to orient students towards a new quotidian practice by providing basic religious knowledge, and guidance for spiritual practice that is linked to dimensions of Sufism. During their last days in Turkey, students tour Istanbul to view the remaining visible representations of Ottoman rule. It is a location in which Manahil focuses on elements she sees as resembling an Eastern aesthetic, ignoring the numerous similitudes on display such as American restaurants, clothing shops, local dress, and the like. Nonetheless, she sees this as an opportunity to view what she considers features of authentic Islam, unavailable to her in her own city.

This chapter presents how religious authority is constructed and maintained through the reshaping of tradition using understood hierarchies, community structures, and a common identity, whilst also being interspersed with political and social dimensions. The intellectual development of teachers positions them on a chain of knowledge transmission that solidifies their authority within the narrative of the tradition they articulate, whilst outlining bodies of knowledge vital for everyday religious practice. Teachers delineate how students should ethically live in the world while embodying the values of a Sufi tradition. Furthermore, their style of

teaching—using the Arabic language in combination with their interpretation of texts via contemporary issues and culture—illustrates how they maintain their authority by exhibiting their intellectual prowess as well as their relatability to the lives of students. The programme’s location also contributes to the construction and maintenance of their authority, borrowing from the power of Rumi’s legacy.

The Start

So, we come here, why? Why not Grand Rapids? Why not Cambridge? [...] The Muslim believes that place is significant because everything in the world is composed of the concatenation of Allah’s purposes. Nothing is kind of randomised. So, what’s significant about here? What air do we breathe? What achievements have been accomplished here for *tawhīd* and what mistakes have been made? So, as we start to get beyond the kind of tourist nonsense of whirling dervishes and mystical dances [...] what this is really about? Not tourism, but serious human beings, serious about determining the meaning of their lives. (Deen Intensive Foundation, *Rihla* 2015 Konya & Istanbul, 2015)

The sound of a low-playing flute is heard in the background of the YouTube video trailer for the *Rihla* programme while Dr T.J. Winter, also known as Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, renowned Cambridge University philosophy professor, prolific writer, and esteemed scholar, speaks. Murad’s voice moves across the ebb and flow of the Bosphorus waters, the city illuminated at dusk. Children play in the courtyard square where the mystic sage Rumi is buried. Tourists mill about. The famous Greek Orthodox basilica, Haga Sophia, and the illustrious Blue Mosque dominate the skyline. We then see a glimpse of Murad, his tall frame cloaked in a long black mantle and dark trousers, with white shirt underneath. A white *kufī* rests on his head, pushed back so that his forehead is visible. His well-known strong countenance is marked with bushy ginger brows, a moustache, and a small beard closely resembling a goatee. Students sit on the floor below him, notebooks resting in their laps, their pens moving hurriedly across the page.

The video cuts to the turquoise cylinder-shaped tower of Rumi's tomb and then again back to Murad in front of his students, ending with an information page with programme details.

In the mid-1990s, Deen Intensive Foundation (DIF) developed the *Rihla* programme, based on a need identified by Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir. Although tethered specifically to this programme, Yusuf and Shakir enjoy celebrity status within the larger American Muslim educational landscape and are two of the only three teachers that were consistently cited by students, across each of the four learning environments within this study, as sources of guidance. Their relationship solidified in the early 1990s and resulted in the development of Zaytuna College, originally Zaytuna Institute, founded in 1996 in Hayward, California. They felt that western Muslims lacked access to “sacred knowledge”, knowledge passed on through a chain of transmission leading back to a well-known scholar or—more coveted—back to Prophet Muhammad, in what is seen as the classical process of learning. Reminiscent of the teaching modes in *madrāsas* of the medieval period, a knowledge of Islamic law is the basis of the programme's curriculum. This early remit of Zaytuna should be contrasted with its current mission as discussed in Chapter 2. Yusuf has positioned his higher education institution as the premiere location for American Muslims to be intellectually trained to deal with the challenges of modernity; it is no longer locations east of the United States or in the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa. Students are required to choose from three of the four schools of legal thought and are grouped together accordingly when studying the rules associated with everyday practices.

Rihla is a three-week intensive programme that teaches specific topics from the corpus of Islamic sciences. It has taken place in the United Kingdom, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the

United States over the past two decades. The programme offers full-day classroom lectures, *dhikr* circles, meditative exercises, and visits to local historical sites. Lecture subjects include Islamic theology; devotional law; spiritual cultivation; praiseworthy innovation; al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Book of Knowledge*; Poetry by Rumi (d. 1273); "Journey through the *Mathnawī* of Rumi"; Qur'ānic exegesis; and financial and family law. One of the most attractive elements of the programme is that it provides students with the opportunity to have face-time with well-known, revered religious teachers.

The programme aims to give students a holistic religious learning experience by "combining dependable and relevant education, dedicated devotional time, and a spiritually inspiring setting" in order to offer "knowledge that is both a religious duty for every Muslim to learn and immediately applicable in life." The choice of location, Turkey, is intentional, given the support the organisation enjoys from the government, facilitating the construction of the programme site each year. Konya is also an important city, for it is the final resting place for the famed Sufi poet Rumi.

Originally of Persian descent, Rumi lived under the rule of the Turkish-Persian state of the Seljuk Empire (11th – 14th century), known as Rum (meaning "Roman" in the Persian language) in the 13th century. Konya was its second capital. It was during his time in Konya that Rumi composed the *Mathnawī*, a literary masterpiece of poetry and an influential Sufi text written in the Persian language. The placement in Konya is clear, as it is the stage to provide students with a *Rihla* experience, a taste of life from a bygone era.

Now at the tail end of Ramadan, I watch as *Rihla* volunteers stand by at Konya airport to welcome students from North America, the Middle East, Europe and a few Scandinavian

countries. Students' travel has inducted them into a network of transnational knowledge seekers. Over the next three weeks, students will reside in Konya, at the Selçuk University. Coach buses pull into the arrival area of the small airport's parking lot, awaiting the students pulling their bags across the walkway to receive instructions. Buses arrive in shifts to take groups of students to the University dormitory. One of the volunteers loads the suitcases into the bus whilst students board. As the bus makes its way through the city, the low buildings providing an unobstructed view of the landscape. Animals graze in open green fields. Few cars are on the roadway and the same goes for people on the local streets. Less than an hour later, the bus makes its way through the gates of the University and pulls up to a winding driveway that ends in the middle of the dormitory area.

A newly-manicured lawn surrounds the large white cement building at the head of the lawn. Inside, the foyer is empty except for two long tables that sit to the left side of the room, at the base of a set of stairs. Green lanyards with nametags are organised on the table along with black shoulder bags with the organisation's logo and the name of the programme written across them. Students line up to register, obtaining course materials and dormitory assignments, and then make their way upstairs to get Wi-Fi access.

Hours later, it is time for the programme orientation. The director of DIF Dr Aisha Subhani, a medical doctor by profession, acts as a narrator, setting the stage for the programme. She mentions the historical importance of the location, sets the ground rules for engagement, and makes some pointed suggestions for students to maximise their learning experience. "Konya is a vanguard of Ottoman study in Turkey," she says. "It is the home of Rumi." She goes on to remind students why they are there, invoking the Prophet's saying, "actions are by intention." In

repeating this hadith¹³ she prompts students to ensure their intentions are purely for knowledge. “This is not social, not a vacation. You’re here to study...seeking knowledge. When things get stressful, remember why you are here,” Subhani emphasises. The two different cities in which the programme takes place would seemingly contradict this statement. As we will come to see, whilst in Konya, students are restricted to classroom lectures, although many visit the city centre between breaks or when skiving. However, when they travel to Istanbul in the last few days, they become tourists. It is a format the administration keeps in place in order to garner a large number of applications. Nonetheless, it is a reminder they receive throughout the programme.

Seeking knowledge is why over one hundred students have come hundreds of miles away and paid the \$3,500 programme cost. Those whom I spoke to articulated that they were there to gain more knowledge, to develop a foundation for their religious practice and develop their religious identities, and often added “spiritual” to their self-description. Although the intensive nature of the programme is explicit in the name of the foundation, Subhani provides more clarity for students about what lies ahead. “The key to success of this program is time-management. The first week everyone is great. The second week people start to taper down,” she explains. They will start strong but will need to put in concerted effort to continue the journey. In addition, she outlines certain rules by which students should abide: mandatory attendance in classes; modest dress (men: no jeans, t-shirts, or tight clothing; women: hijab; no tight clothing), no bold labelling on clothing; and no hanging out in places where one doesn’t seemingly belong.

¹³ “Actions are but by intentions and every man shall have only that which he intended. Thus, he whose migration (Hijrah to Madinah from Makkah) was for Allah and His Messenger, his migration was for Allah and His Messenger, and he whose migration was to achieve some worldly benefit or to take some woman in marriage, his migration was for that for which he migrated.” Sahih Bukhari 54, Sahih Muslim 1907.

Subhani communicates the importance of *adab*, comportment, a high sense of dignified behaviour that should be found in one who claims to be a Muslim. “Teachers are telling us things in the class that are meant for us. It’s an *amanah* (trust),” Subhani says. While providing students with necessary religious knowledge, the programme also endeavours to orient students towards specific religious actions they can continue to practice back home. “The knowledge you gain here will last a lifetime,” Subhani tells students. Furthermore, she encourages students to act in a way that is befitting of the knowledge they will acquire. In this vein, Subhani implores students to resist the urge to take pictures, and to remove themselves from social media for the next few weeks. While this is to familiarise students with specific exemplary behaviour for their own practice, it also serves as a way to instil a sense of respect for religious scholarship, as illustrated by the teachers, and the stories of their own teachers from whom they have inherited tradition.

Her colleague Dr Asad Tarsin, also a medical doctor, develops the programme’s curriculum. When it is his turn to address the group, he speaks about the type of knowledge they will acquire. The programme is structured to provide a “...bird’s eye view of the religion. [You will get] a well-rounded understanding of the vision of Islam. The vision and spirit of Islam,” Tarsin says, referring to the hadith of Prophet Muhammad upon which the organisation is built.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab reports:

While we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, a man came up to us whose clothes were extremely white, whose hair was extremely black, upon whom traces of traveling could not be seen, and whom none of us knew, until he sat down close to the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, so that he rested his knees upon his knees and placed his two hands upon his thighs and said, “Muhammad, tell me about Islam.” The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Islam is that you witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and you establish the prayer, and you give

the *zakat*, and you fast Ramadan, and you perform the hajj of the House if you are able to take a way to it." He said, "You have told the truth," and we were amazed at him asking him and [then] telling him that he told the truth. He said, "Tell me about *imān* (faith)." He said, "That you affirm Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you affirm the Decree, the good of it and the bad of it." He said, "You have told the truth." He said, "Tell me about *ihsān* (intimate observation of God)." He said, "That you worship Allah as if you see Him, for if you don't see Him then truly He sees you." He said, "Tell me about the Hour." He said, "The one asked about it knows no more than the one asking." He said, "Then tell me about its tokens." He said, "That the female slave should give birth to her mistress, and you see poor, naked, barefoot shepherds of sheep and goats competing in making tall buildings." He went away, and I remained some time. Then he asked, "Umar, do you know who the questioner was?" I said, "Allah and His Messenger know best." He said, "He was Jibreel who came to you to teach you your *dīn*."¹⁴

As indicated on the organisation's website, "All courses will fall under one of these elements:

Islam, imān, and ihsān. We believe that the cumulative understanding, learning, and practice of

these three branches of the religion are what guide us to live as upright Muslims," (Rihla

website, n.d.). Tarsin assures students that "If you master the material you will have the basics of what you should know. It's designed to give you the minimum that every believer should have."

He confirms Subhani's comments regarding the time commitment, "...each day is intense. Don't expect the class time to suffice," he says. He tells students to "rectify their intention" and

reminds them of their good fortune. "Traditionally you had to seek teachers. They are meeting you halfway. The chewing of food that you do to children has been done to us," he says.

Before students are dismissed, Subhani offers me the floor for a few minutes to identify myself as a researcher and explain my research project, in hopes of being able to solicit student participation. I speak for less than five minutes about my background and discuss the importance of telling one's story considering the negative views held by both Muslims and non-Muslims

¹⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari Book 2, Hadith 43

about Muslims studying Islam and those traveling to seek knowledge. I offer students an opportunity to tell their story and provide nuance to current assumptions and perceptions of Muslims. After concluding with instructions for those interested in participating, I turn the floor back over to the organisers. With some last-minute directions for where and what time to catch the buses that will shuttle students to and from the dormitory, the session ends. I hand out questionnaires to students who approach me, asking their names, attempting to commit them to memory.

In gendered groups, students board long extended buses which have an accordion-like centre joining two halves and experience a very hot twenty-minute ride. The driver has failed to turn on the air conditioner, so moans and groans from the students are heard for the duration. When we arrive, the young women burst free to get fresh air. Everyone walks towards a large dome-shaped building, the newly constructed Bilim-Merkezi—the Konya Science Centre and Planetarium. Many students attempt to make a dash to the doors in the most dignified way possible. There's always a rush to get a front seat to be near the teachers. This opportunity is one of the hallmark elements of many intensive programmes of this nature. While students have often spent months or years listening to teachers on various forms of media or reading their books, attending lectures where one sees the teacher in person is still the most popular source of acquiring knowledge for students. In this somewhat smaller setting, students can meet them face-to-face, observe their behaviour, interact with them, and perhaps truly study at their hand.

Grabbing jewel-coloured floor-cushions stacked at the sides of the room, students make their way towards the stage, dropping their cushions next to one another on the beige industrial carpet, and intuitively creating rows one behind the other. A set of small writing tables form a

makeshift divide between the men and women. The stage is outfitted with a taupe couch at its centre. A burgundy oriental-patterned throw, with intricate threads of gold, wine, blue, and emerald green, lies over its back. A *Rihla* banner stands off to the side in the background, “Islam, Iman, Ihsan” is boldly written across it.

This is the first session to begin the daily programme of lectures spread through the day, along with the five daily prayers, meals, and sleep. The subject for the session is “Islamic Theology,” taught by a science teacher, by profession, who has studied Islamic Sciences in Saudi Arabia and Syria and is currently completing a dissertation exploring the educational aims of an Islamic education as outlined by a classical Muslim educationist and judge, Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā‘ah (d. 1333). Two large projector screens are on either side of the stage, one in front of each of the gendered groups. The pedagogical training of the teacher is apparent given his well-organised lecture. He begins with the importance of “first principles”, a topic that aligns with the liberal arts approach of Zaytuna College. A PowerPoint presentation behind him summarises his points. He is using a classical text, *Al-‘Aqīdah aṭ-Ṭahāwiyya*, the Creed of *Ṭahāwi*, written by Abu Ja'far al-Ṭahāwi (d. 329), a famous Egyptian scholar of the Hanafi juristic school of thought. He outlines what will be covered for each session, providing students with a roadmap for the course subject. The teacher reads through parts of the text in Arabic and then stops to provide the translation. As he goes through the content, providing grammatical analysis and morphological explanations along the way, he tells students that he will often use Arabic terms and expects them to adapt. At the end of the class, he rhetorically quizzes the students, providing the answers to the questions himself and tells students if they got them all right then they get an A for the day. The session ends, and dinner is served.

Students make their way downstairs to the dining area that is set up with tables in long lines across in the middle of the room, and smaller four-person tables around its walls. Places are formally set and small bread rolls, little juice boxes, and cups of water are provided. The students sit, men and women separately, with small groups of friends or acquaintances clustered together. I end up at a table with a group of young women, amongst them some of the students who recently graduated from Zaytuna College's first graduating class, two months prior. As the catering staff serve dinner, the room is abuzz with voices. At some point, I notice a hushed silence forming amongst the young women closest to me. I turn from the ongoing conversation and see Shaykh Hamza Yusuf walking around the tables, greeting students.

His dress is—as it often is—dark slacks, a long suit jacket reaching his knees, and a crisp white dress shirt, open at the neck. His dark-framed glasses are pushed back against his face, hiding intelligent eyes that are never seen bare during the duration of the programme. A black rounded cloth cap sits slightly pushed back on the top of his head, white fabric visible beneath its front. He makes his way over to the table of his college's graduates. "Look at these gems, 'Zaytunis'," he says. "You know where I first heard that? Reading Scott Korb's book." Korb, a journalist, wrote a book that tells his impression of the College and its students, as he shadows the lives of the students in Zaytuna's pilot programme leading up to its university accreditation. Yusuf continues, "And I said why is he [Korb] calling them that? Then I found out that they [the Zaytuna students] call themselves that." He laughs softly, gives the group a smile, and moves on. The young women smile and follow him with their eyes for a few moments and then return to their conversation. After dinner and the performing of the evening prayer with Qur'ānic

recitation following, Yusuf takes the stage to begin the last session, scheduled to run until 10 PM every evening.

Knowledge and its Interlocutors

As can be seen from the quote at the beginning, setting is key to *Rihla's* approach towards knowledge acquisition. Murad encourages students to reflect, "Let's remind ourselves as to why we have decided to come here. We can't really get a sense of where the *umma* is and how we got here without knowing our history." He sees Konya as "a place where the spirit is still aflame" with "luminous hearts." He illustrates the relationship between teachers and the process of knowledge acquisition. The *Rihla* programme is structured in such a way as to give students a chance to be with individuals from different walks of life and provide personal access to these teachers. The presence of Hamza Yusuf is a huge factor in students deciding to apply for the program. Students often mentioned his name as one of their reasons for attendance. Although his session is the last in a long day of class lectures, it is always the most attended. As his own educational history makes apparent, much of his popularity is drawn from his connection to scholars from a past era and his knowledge of their lives. The thrust of the Zaytuna project aims to address what Yusuf terms a "crisis of knowledge" within the global Muslim *umma*. It is rooted in an idea that education is a process of coming to know God through remembrance.

You cannot teach people what they don't already know. That learning in our tradition is remembering. It's *tadhākir*. It's a recollection of what we already to know. This is why the Qur'ān says, *wa dhakir*, remind. Make them remember what they already knew. What is it that we already knew? We knew a covenant that we took in another dimension. It was a sacred covenant. And it began with "*a lastu bi rabikum*", "Am I not your lord?" And as spirits, we replied in the affirmative, *bala shahidna*. "Indeed, you are our lord and we were witness to this." We're brought into this world and the world is a place of

remembrance. It is to remember a previous existence. It is to recollect. It is to recall. This is why we call *dhikrulAllah*, *dhikrulAllah* (recollection of God). Because we remember what we already knew. You cannot remember something you didn't know previously. This is the highest form of knowledge in our tradition. To know your Lord. (Yusuf, Crisis of Knowledge, 2014)

By highlighting this sacred covenant Yusuf draws attention to the way in which he sees the process of education within Islamic tradition.

The essence of education is to draw the true nature, the true innocence of the child...into existence. In our tradition, we have no word that corresponds to education. There is no word in the history of Islam that corresponds to the English word "education". We have two concepts that always kept together, *tarbiya* and *ta'lim*. The idea of nurturing and the idea of educating. In other words, you cannot separate the nurturing process from the process of education. And this is why they went together. The *murrabbī*, the *mu'addib*, the *mu'allim*, they went together. The teacher was spiritual mentor as well as being an intellectual mentor. You cannot separate the spirit from the intellect. Because the intellect, in and of itself, is a spiritual phenomenon. It is not a material phenomenon. Consciousness is spiritual. The very centre of the human being, this core...is an immaterial reality. It is a spiritual reality. So, the *murrabbī* was the one who took you by degrees, who brought you out of yourself. That's why the word *madrasa* means the place of enfacement. It is the place where the negative qualities are effaced, and the positive qualities are inculcated. They called the first stage of education "*takhliya*," the emptying out of the self. The second stage was "*tahliya*," the adorning of the self with those beautiful qualities, what the ancients called, truth, goodness, and beauty—what we call *imān*, Islam, *ihsān*. *Imān* is our truth, there is no god but Allah. Islam is the way that we behave with goodness in the world. And *ihsān* is the profound need for the human being to make things beautiful and to recognise beauty...The essence of our lord is mercy. The essence of his prophet is mercy. This is the *tarbiya*, inculcating mercy. It's taking the child out of its cruelty, out of its selfishness, into a sharing creature. A creature who wants to serve others instead of being served by others. And then the *ta'lim* is the *huda*. So *tarbiya* and *ta'lim* are *rahma* (mercy) and *huda*. Mercy and guidance are the essence of our tradition. (Yusuf, Crisis of Knowledge, 2014)

Yusuf sees al-Ghazālī as the premiere source of a model for this inculcation of mercy and practical spiritual guidance. "[Al- Ghazālī] showed [that] everything we do has spiritual dimension," Yusuf says. He acknowledges critics of al-Ghazālī's work and the weak chain of some of the hadith used, however, without an explanation as to why, he communicates that he

believes al-Ghazālī's path is still a right one. "I'm certain that this man got it right. I'm certain. That's how I feel about him. I trust him as a source," he says to the students.

Yusuf uses the first chapter of al-Ghazālī's work, "The Book of Knowledge," as the text for his lectures. Like the didactic lecture approach of each of the programme's teachers, Yusuf's technique is a mixture of Arabic reading, translation, interpretation, allegorism, and social commentary. He reads the Arabic text quickly and pauses at intervals to translate, preventing some students from losing focus. As indicated by the comments of one student, "It's hard when they translate, I feel like I want them to get to the English already. Shaykh Hamza does it so quickly you don't realise it." His interpretation delves into not only the meaning to be gleaned from the text but also the character and nature of men such as al-Ghazālī, who were able to produce such illustrious works of writing. He regales students with the life events of great scholars, what they accomplished in terms of writing, the power of their memory, and the ways in which they performed both their obligatory and voluntary acts of worship.

When you make mention of righteous people mercy descends. One of the benefits of the, it instils in you a desire to be like them because we are an imitative species. We tend to aspire to virtue by our nature. So, when you read about virtuous people and then when you see them.... these people are far less common. We know they are real. Sometimes the hagiography...seems exaggerated. Having personally known people like that I know it's possible because I've seen it with my own eyes. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 2 August 2014)

He speaks of scholars of a distant past and sometimes even of his own teachers, some of whom are still living, in this way. He and other teachers focus on the relationship between student and teacher. Feraidoon Mojaddedi, one of the programme's teachers and a student of Yusuf, illustrates this relationship when he speaks of Yusuf.

Why do we love our teachers? Because they connect us to Allah and His messenger...I think people need to sit with scholars and learn and travel. For the basics I'm okay with

online, but if you're trying to become a scholar through online then you are wasting your time. (Mojaddedi, lecture, 9 August 2014)

However, many of the students are not there to become scholars, nor is it the intention of the programme to turn people into scholars. Yet, he goes on to quote Muhammad Yaqoubi, a contemporary Syrian scholar of similar Sufi inclinations, said to be a descendant of the Prophet.

Yaqoubi said when a scholar has chain back to the Rasul (messenger of God) and speaks, he is inhaling a breath that is exhaled by the Prophet...scholars have the breath of the prophetic...then the presence, you learn a lot from the presence of the *shuyukh*. (Mojaddedi, lecture, 9 August 2014).

Yusuf's evening lectures are peppered with quick comments about politics, social issues, lines of poetry from Robert Frost, and references to C.S. Lewis. When he delivers his lectures, he draws attention to specific elements of his speech and presents himself as merely providing the listener with an objective reality. "There are two things that Shaykh Hamza always says, 'Seriously' and 'I'm not making this up,'" one student remarks. Indeed, during his sessions one can hear him emphasise different parts of the lecture, using signalling statements such as: "You get that?"; "Listen to this"; "This is really important"; "This is a true story, I'm not making this up."

At one point, he remarks with displeasure on the viral video sensation made by Muslims across the world to a song by Pharrell, a popular hip-hop artist, entitled 'Happy'. Muslims in various locations from Somalia and Yemen to London and Washington D.C. played the song in the background while they bopped and danced to the music, showing their happiness. The "Happy Muslims—Country/City X" videos went viral. The videos drew wide censure from conservative Muslims for many reasons— the inappropriateness of music and showing Muslim women dancing, to name a few. Yusuf's response was a strong condemnation. "I wanted to put together a video of all of those people dancing and then people of Syria, Palestine, everything

and then at the end say...the field Negroes are happy that the house Negroes are happy," he says, with a hint of anger in his voice.

His use of the words of Malcolm X, in addition to his commentary, are an attempt to illustrate how Muslims are "selling out" other parts of the *umma* and perhaps engaging too much in the reproduction of popular culture. At times, Yusuf seemingly goes off-script. His frustration, disappointment, and anger come out in a diatribe that would leave the listener blistering with offense or even intense shame. Perhaps this is the emotion he seeks to evoke. Nonetheless, it does not put students off. In fact, it endears him to them even more. "This is the part of the night I like," one student remarks with a smile, when it becomes apparent that Yusuf is heading down a familiar path.

We need to unite. At least be united in acknowledging that people come to different conclusions about situations. We are all trying. For me, I think this is the most important thing Muslims need to be thinking about. Because I look at the Muslim world and I see people cutting people's heads off. And I see angry people. And I see people taking a seventy-year-old ruler and sticking a knife up his backside...I don't see the prophet coming into Makkah. I don't see Umar coming into Jerusalem...The *tarbiya* that those men had was this *tarbiya*. This is what I want to see. When we do finally go into Jerusalem that we don't slaughter people. Seriously, that's what I want to see. That we have the prophetic character. Now we have the power, this is the time to show *rahma* when we're in power. That's the time to show *rahma*. "They didn't show it to us." They're not our teachers. "But they do it to us." They're not our teachers. Our teachers are [the Prophet] *salla Allah 'alayhi wa-sallam*. That's our teacher. "*wa-mā arsalnāka illā raḥmatan lil-‘ālamīn.*"¹⁵ It's a mercy. The Prophet forgave people. Umm Jamil used to put thorns on his path. One day he came out and they weren't there he went to see if she was okay. She was sick that day, so he visited her. *Subhanallah*. Where is that? ...Even bad people, you wish for them good. The prophet didn't wish for people's destruction, he wanted their salvation. That's what he was concerned about. He didn't want to chop heads off. He wanted to enlighten heads. He wanted to restore them. That's who our prophet *salla Allah 'alayhi wa-sallam* is. I don't see him represented anywhere in our *umma* anymore. I wish I could say look this is Islam. Here it is. I can't point to it. The Topkapı, the blue mosque, those are stones. Where are the hearts that built those stones? Where are the hearts that beauty came out of? Where are the hearts? It's not

¹⁵ "We sent you [Prophet] only as a mercy to all people'." Quran: Chapter 21, Verse 107

easy. He [al-Ghazālī] was so fed up with himself that he had to go into treatment for ten years. But that's why we're here teaching his book. All of the people who attacked him, all of the people who burnt his books, we're not teaching their books...everyone was against him when he was alive. Allah will judge us but it's the people who come later who will sort out this mess... everyone wants to be on top. Everyone wants their position. But it's all *ijtihad*. That's always been. We're all doing our best... all this hatred in our *umma* for dissention. Everyone has to toe the party line. If you just deviate from the common thread that everyone seems to be attached to, which personally I think has brought a lot of tribulation and despair on this community...I don't know. I swear to God; I want to go into *'uzla* (seclusion). It's just madness. You can't even speak anymore without everyone just jumping on you. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 4 August 2014)

Yusuf asks that Muslims to aspire to unity and recognise that everyone is doing their best. He seems to imply this of the religious teachers who sometime experience censure from their audiences. If not, his previous condemnation of the “Happy Muslims” doesn't acknowledge that the average Muslim may indeed be doing their best. Nonetheless, no one jumps on Yusuf. He charms the crowd. He laughs with them, even throws in an occasional sardonic smile. His monologue is filled with condemnation of those who promote violence in the name of Islam. He introduces some to their history, forces others to remember it, and arouses a sense of guilt; just enough to prevent the audience from disliking him, while they abashedly confront their lesser selves. Smiles from the audience abound.

Imam Zaid Shakir, one of Yusuf's partners in the Zaytuna College project, is cited by students as the second most likely source of religious guidance. During *Rihla*, Shakir's lessons focus on what one can learn from the first chapter of the Qur'ān, *Sūra al-Fatiha*. Like Yusuf, his talk consists of religious reflections combined with social commentary, drawing lines between the Prophet's time and the present. He uses commonly-cited events in the life of the Prophet, in this case, when the growing Muslim population in Madinah signed a treaty with the polytheists of Makkah.

The companions wanted to go forward. Sacrifice your animals...the companions said no, we're not letting the *kuffar* (disbelievers) treat us like this. We got numbers now. We're going to Makkah. We don't care what they say...did the Prophet say, "oh Allah destroy these disobedient wretches?" No. Easy going when they oppose you. That's the true test of character. This is the *rahma* of the Prophet. If you were cruel and rough, hard-hearted, they would have run away from you.¹⁶ And so again, people who say they represent the true Islam. When they come into the lands do people run to them or away from them? Are people coming to ISIS or are people running from ISIS?

When there are slights and insults against the prophet, we should try to respond, with a vengeful spirit, but not as lunatics. So, our vengeance should be a manifesting beauty of the prophet's character. That's how we get even. They say don't get mad, get even. (Z. Shakir, lecture, 11 August 2014)

Shakir chuckles softly and the students join him. He continues, "But that's how we get even, by letting people see the beauty, by responding, putting [out] our literary talents." Yusuf and Shakir's evoking of ISIS activities draws a clear line between the actions of part of the *umma* and how these actions should be seen, considering the narrations from the life of Prophet Muhammad. In this way, both Yusuf's and Shakir's demonstration of who they are is also based on referencing who they are not.

Coming to Know Rumi

In addition to al-Ghazālī, Rumi is one of the other main historical scholars around which most of the programme's content orbits. "This is not a teaching class or a preaching class," Feraiidoon Mojaddedi remarks at the beginning of his lecture. He hails from Rumi's place of birth, modern-day Afghanistan. He migrated to the United States during the Russian invasion in the early eighties, settling with his family in California. He is one of Yusuf's students; he is proficient in Farsi and uses it adeptly to read and interpret the text as Yusuf does with Arabic. After all, he says, "We are in his town and I'm going to read in Farsi in honour of that." Using Rumi's magnum

¹⁶ Referring to the Qur'an, Chapter 4, verse 159

opus, the *Mathnawī*, Mojaddedi offers a taste of the love of God felt by the mystic. He reads poems from the *Mathnawī* and, when finished, asks students what lesson they get from the story that plays out in the poem. Students use the roaming wireless microphone and give their take on the poems. Mojaddedi provides positive remarks to their comments. No response is wrong. At times, he further adds some of his own explanation, guiding the students to see the meaning he has derived from Rumi's words. His teaching style leaves room for students to come to their own understanding. He explicitly pushes them to this point of reflection.

The story that Mevlana is saying, it's your story. You have to find yourself in the story. He's talking about the universal story of the human creation. [The] human story is one. It's one story. We all share the same human story. That's why you have to find yourself, where are you at? (F. Mojaddedi, lecture, 9 August 2014)

While Rumi enjoyed fame and popularity from a young age until his thirties, it was only with his meeting with an older wandering dervish that he came into the magnitude of his spiritual stature. Shams al-Din Tabriz, from the town of Tabriz in modern day Iran, was Rumi beloved companion. Mojaddedi inquires rhetorically about the nature of friendship. "What is a friend? Someone who remembers Allah with you and when you forget she or he reminds you," he says. Rumi illustrates the importance of good companions in one of his poems: "Stay away from the bad person. Even *alif* became crooked when it started to hand around with *laam*,"¹⁷ he jokes. Theirs was a grand love affair in the realm of mystic understanding, Mojaddedi implies. "Shams was the only one would could understand him and only Rumi could understand him," Mojaddedi says. He quotes Rumi's words, "I was a dead person walking then I met Shams. The kingdom of love arrived, and my kingdom became forever. Because once you fall in love you

¹⁷ The letter 'alif', ا, when written alone - ا. When it is joined with the letter 'laam', ل it is written لا

never die.” But one day, Shams of Tabriz was nowhere to be found. Suspicion surrounds his death. Some myths say he was killed, the close family and friends of Rumi being jealous of his inimitable relationship with Rumi. Others posit that he left town of his own accord. Although Rumi eschewed fame and looked forward to death as it was to be the meeting time with his beloved God, his writings reached an unwanted height of fame upon his death. The Mevlevi Dervish Order was based on Rumi teachings. And people from various faiths and backgrounds travel to visit his tomb.

In addition to Mojaddedi, Abdal Hakim Murad is teaching from Rumi’s work. Ironically making an appearance in the British version of the “Happy Muslims” video, Murad is known for his singing and recitation of different litanies. He often begins his sessions with different cantillations. For a little over ten minutes, he recites five different phrases, beginning with the recitation of faith, then sending blessings on Prophet Muhammad, and the rest a mixture of giving thanks to God, asking for forgiveness, and the last three chapters of the Qur’ān.

Holding a *misbahah* (rosary like string of beads) in his right hand, his eyes are closed and his legs are placed together, crossed at the ankles. His voice is barely audible, to the point where the whirring of the air-conditioner is a disturbance and is shut off so that his words can carry across the room. The students, many aware of this type of religious act of remembrance and seeing nothing wrong with it, join in with him. Many of them have their eyes closed and others are rocking from side to side. However, one student’s reaction shows the confusion that persists amongst many Muslims and the scepticism they hold towards what are considered Sufi practices, perceived to lie outside the realm of orthodoxy. One student later says,

I've just always done *dhikr* alone by myself. I didn't know what to do. I looked at my mom and dad and they looked equally confused. When we got to the *istighfār* (asking God for forgiveness), I just sat on my hand. I didn't want to be rude or anything.

Listening to Murad's recitation, students are reminded to begin all activities with the name of God on their tongues. When Murad finishes with the chant he places his *misbaha* on the seat next to him and asks everyone to read the first chapter of the Qur'ān. Hands raised to the ceiling, the room is silent as students whisper the verses they recite in every gesticulation of prayer, wiping their hands over their face when finished. Their pleasure is unmasked. "I love him," I hear someone whisper.

Murad puts on reading glasses and opens the text. Also proficient in Persian, his style is similar to the other teachers, whereby he reads the text in its original language and provides an interpretation and comments on current affairs. Murad's mien is often unsmiling (which added to people's amusement when he appeared in the "Happy British Muslims" video) and his voice is soft and tempered. When students attempt to cajole him to begin his last session with his normal chant, he sardonically retorts, "I'm not an MP3 player." They laugh in response. It matters not; someone recorded the previous sessions and it is shared with the group over social media networks weeks later. At the end of his session I watch as a male student, in quick measured order, makes his way to the front of the room to pick up Murad's glass of water from the table, downing the remaining water. Maximum closeness achieved.

Visiting Rumi

After completing a week of the programme, students are scheduled to meet Rūmī. They make their way through the city as a large group. It's the first outing of the program and they eagerly wander around the small area of the city. At the beginning of Mevlâna Caddesi, the main

street leading directly to Rumi's tomb, an unobtrusive sea-green fixture stands on the outer perimeter of the first block. One of the young women removes a water bottle from her handbag and pours water over the clear panel, using a tissue to wipe away the dirt. She reads the plaque and notes that it marks the place where Rumi and Shams are alleged to have met for the first time. A group of students walk with Shakir as he leads them to the different mosques along the path to Rumi's tomb, so that they can perform short supplementary prayers in each mosque. It is easy to make him out, towering over those around him, garbed in all white from his *kufi* to his long white gown and trousers.

The shops full of Sufi-themed tourist trinkets, prayer beads, miniature figurines of whirling dervishes, prayer beads, long tunics, and headscarves beckon others. By six in the evening, the students mill around the courtyard of the Rumi Museum. "Selmye Camii" is written in rusted gold lettering on a bronze plate atop the entrance of the mosque. It is positioned adjacent to Rumi tomb, demarcated by a wall. As the students wait to enter, they take pictures of each other, selfies with teachers and the wives of the teachers, the tomb of Rumi in the background. The cylindrical tower of the tomb stands with a cone in a distinct aquamarine colour at its top. A band of Arabic script in gold lettering wraps its way around the top of the cylinder right below the cone. The green *Rihla* lanyards stand out against the scarves of the women and shirts of the men, allowing volunteers to easily identify students among Rumi's other visitors. It also serves another purpose, as without these badges one would not be let into the after-hours private tour that the programme has secured.

One by one students pass through a turnstile at the entrance, making their way into the museum. As they enter the open-air courtyard, some of them peek into the windows on the

right, which provide a glimpse into the history of the dervish order. The shaded circle of the moon is fixed against the background of a clear blue sky. The sun is slowly making its descent. The women file in one by one, the men waiting patiently behind them in the square. Blue plastic bags are placed at the entrance and it takes some time for each of the students to put them on over their shoes.

The programme's cameraman is crouched against the wall opposite the entrance, capturing the procession. Inside, the floors are made of wood, protected against shoe heels by the swishing of plastic against its surface. The building houses the family and descendants of Rumi. Each tomb is draped with a velvet covering, moss green turbans on some, others with white ones, and some with none. The turbans identify the men in the family, while the women go without. I can make out the hard marble at the base and ropes of beads resembling a large circle of prayer beads draped around them.

As we make our way to the back of the tomb, there is a passage to a smaller room to the left, housing some ritual objects. I hear weeping, crying, and sniffing as I come into the room. I see many students, both men and women alike, wiping tears from their faces. A glass casing is set in the middle of the room and students queue in front of it. Inside lies a miniature chest. A small hole is bored into the bottom section of the casing, where students bow slightly, putting their noses against it to inhale the scent. The chest is said to hold a piece of hair from Prophet Muhammad. The lasting presence of his scent is professed to be testament to the miracle of the Prophet. Aisha, one of the students, is struck by her visit. "It's a different kind of knowing. I felt it in my heart. I was there with the Prophet's hair and could smell its scent. Tears welled up in my eyes but I didn't cry. It got stuck right here," she says as she points to the centre of her chest. "I

don't know what that means but being there was so beautiful." The students are eventually ushered from the room to keep time for the remaining activities of the night.

The Sema

The sun is setting behind Rumi's tomb, scorching the clouds on its descent, giving them fire-coloured edges. The students exit the tomb and make their way to the side of the building, where a mini coliseum is situated. There are other tourists present and students walk between them within the rows of each level to find a seat. As they settle in, Yusuf gives them a brief introduction to the event and what they will see. Many Muslims consider the performance of the whirling dervishes an innovation, circumventing the normative practices of worshipping God. Shakir later comments that "it may be *bid'a* (an innovation) but you had young children here who grow up with this, this recitation of Allah, instead of Madonna." He tries to emphasise that such a relationship with God is less blameworthy than a relationship with pop culture. The *sema* is a performance practiced in some Sufi orders to portray one's remembrance of God. The twelve Sufi disciples slowly walk into the circle one behind another, ten dervishes, one master, and one *melvi*, each garbed in dust-coloured turbans and a black cloak covering their white clothing—a top reaching the waist and an expansive skirt. The headdress is meant to symbolise the tombstone of the ego, and the skirt, the ego's shroud.

While the strains of music, a mix of drum and flute and the voices of two men, mingle in the air, the disciples shed their black cloaks to make way for a spiritual re-encounter with the truth. With arms crossed over their chests and hands at their shoulders, they move along to the centre of the coliseum. One by one they begin to whirl from right to left, their skirts flapping around them in waves. Their hands slowly glide down the sides of their torsos and then continue

back up until they are raised in the air, one held palm faced open to the sky and the other loosely held with fingers pointing to the ground. When the dervishes have finished, and returned to their starting line, a young man ends the event with a recitation of verses from the Qur'ān:

The East and the West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is His Face. God is all pervading and all knowing. They have asserted, "God has a child." May He be exalted! No! Everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him, everything devoutly obeys His will. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, "Be," and it is. Those who have no knowledge also say, "If only God would speak to us!" or "If only a miraculous sign would come to us!" People before them said the same things: their hearts are all alike. We have made Our signs clear enough to those who have solid faith. We have sent you [Prophet] with the truth, bearing good news and warning. You will not be responsible for the inhabitants of the Blaze.¹⁸

Whilst the legal permissibility of the practice within Sunni orthodoxy is often disputed, it exemplifies one of the points of orientation to which the *Rihla* aims to draw students; remembrance of God, and in this case, overcoming the *nafs* (ego), to draw closer to God. As one of the teachers affirms through using the *Mathnawī*,

There's no remedy in the *Mathnawī* to change the world. He talks about if you want to change the world you have to change yourself. But changing yourself is very hard. The reason why is because Allah has put a universe inside of you. The entire cosmos is inside of you. And changing that is hard. (Mojaddedi, lecture, 9 August 2014)

Gradual Habituation

The residential element of *Rihla*, along with its pace, allows for bonds to develop rather quickly between students, given eighteen hours spent together each day. At over one hundred and twenty pupils, the size of the programme is both a benefit and a hindrance. On the one hand, people are exposed to a variety of different views and opinions of students from different parts of the world, but on the other hand, one doesn't often engage with the same person

¹⁸ Qur'ān, Chapter 2, Verses 115-199

repeatedly unless a concerted effort is made. As a result, different cliques develop among some, sometimes marginalising others. Nonetheless, the feeling one obtains from being around people with like-minded religious objectives is not lost, as they all aim to get a taste of the types of things they can implement to flavour their daily lives with the spirit of Islam. As Yusuf says, “You have to learn before you can speak and act.”

The sessions of the programme are in full swing by the second week and students realise that Subhani didn’t exaggerate during the orientation session. Mona, an older student and the mother of adolescent children, has a more difficult time than her younger peers.

I’m tired. I feel bad saying that, but I’m a bit older, but it’s really hard. It’s hard to do the breakout sessions, the morning exercise, have a meal, have a nap...you can’t do everything. It’s not the same on the livestream. And are people going to get up so early? I know we have the recordings but are we really going to listen to them? (Student, personal communication, 17 August 2014)

Mona seems to imply that the stress and fatigue of being present in Konya outweighs the benefits of being able to sit in the comfort of one’s home to watch the sessions. Students are expected to be at the main building in the designated room at five in the morning for the pre-dawn prayer. They engage in three different ways of remembrance before the hustle and the bustle of a new day begins: the performance of the obligatory prayer involving the body and recitation, the recitation of a chapter of the Qur’ān, and the recitation of a litany about God and His Prophet.

The first days start out strong with the room full of students, but the numbers soon dwindle. It is the young women who persist and on average at least thirty of them show up to the pre-dawn prayer, more than half well before the call to prayer is made. The young men tiredly straggle in as the clock draws closer to five. Less than five of them early, with the

remainder of their numbers, often around fifteen, arriving right on time or a few minutes thereafter. This glaring difference may be since there are less men attending the programme.

After prayer, the men and women form separate circles and read *sūra al-Yasin*, often referred to as the heart of the Qur'ān. Shakir is the only teacher to consistently attend the prayer in the morning, along with his wife, and the two remain with the group to recite from the Qur'ān and the chosen litany. The litany, chosen by Yusuf, is part of a collection of sayings mentioned in different prophetic narrations. On finishing at six, the dedicated members of the group make their way outside to practice Qigong.

In a low, moderated voice Dr Philip Yang, a specialist in traditional Chinese medicine, leads a dozen or so students in a series of breathing and stretching exercises to promote internal balance. He talks about energy forces around them as he instructs the students to move their limbs in slow motion to and fro, reaching up towards the sky. They begin with open hands but then twist them inward to embrace the energy from the earth. The physical meditative exercise aims to put the body in a state of ease outside of obligatory prayer. This is seen as being in touch with nature and having another type of grounding.

A light breakfast spread is laid out in the canteen by seven in the morning, consisting of fruits, bread, cereal, and hard-boiled eggs or pancakes on occasion. Again, the students are reminded not to be weighed down by food, abiding by the Prophetic behaviour of avoiding overeating. Classes begin at nine in the morning, not allowing much time for dallying if one plans to catch the buses to the Science Centre. However, by the middle of the programme, some students sleep in or watch the livestream from their beds before taking a cab to the Centre later in the morning. Others arrive on the morning bus but camp out in the prayer rooms on the lower

floor to have a nap. Sometimes the room overflows with people, barring entry from the doorway. Not enough seats are available for everyone to sit for the bus ride, so the early students get to relax on the way in. As I ride the bus with the young women, I see they are engaged in multiple activities. Many are chatting to one another about mundane topics. Some students silently look out the window. Others engage in some sort of reflection or remembrance, listening to Qur'ān on their phones, headphones in place.

Aisha, a student in her mid-twenties, stands close to a group of young women, grasping the pole of the bus in one hand, her book of litanies in the other. She reads silently to herself and then switches to reading from the Qur'ān, reading for a few minutes before switching back to her litanies. Her lips continue to move silently as the morning rays of the sun snap across her face and the bus moves through the nearly empty roadway. Goats and cows graze in the open fields, seen from the window behind her. When she finishes, she looks up to join the conversation around her but doesn't enter it. The bus stops soon after and everyone disembarks.

Each morning one of the volunteers makes announcements before the start of class with news of changes in the schedule or logistics. He also repeatedly reminds students about the dress code and the importance of being in a respectful state when learning. I don't observe many of the men diverging from the guidelines, however, the attire of the women often transgresses these bounds. It is also stressed for students to stay off Twitter and avoid posting pictures on Instagram or Facebook. The programme staff, however, post on social media for the public and students continue to post quotes from teachers, selfies with their peers or the teachers, and images of their course materials and surroundings. Incidentally, the staff retweet and repost many of the students' posts on the organisation's accounts in seeming contradiction

with their request to avoid social media. It is an incentive for others to post and be reposted by the programme staff.

By mid-day, when students return to the dorm for lunch, the intensity of the heat and schedule begins to slow people down. Wandering the women's dorms, not much is heard except for the blades of the fans blowing air into the hot rooms. The sun is high in the sky and the rose-coloured curtains fail to block out the hot rays as the young women lay sleeping in their single beds, trying to catch an hour of rest before a review session or FaceTime with one of the teachers, Yusuf being an exception. Other sleepers will get two hours respite if they skip the review.

The review sessions allow for students to have additional time with the teachers, providing instruction on the different schools of thought that outline religious law. As each student previously identified which school (*madhhab*) they wanted to learn from, the larger group is split into three smaller groups. Classes are on rules related to purification, prayer, marriage, family, and finance—seen as the individual obligations all Muslims must know. This is a staple element of the programme. “You should learn a *madhhab* and you should follow a *madhhab*,” Yusuf advises. Many students attend precisely so they can get this information in one trusted location. As one student remarks in her Maliki school class, “I’ve been waiting for this. To have an outline of exactly what I need to be doing to practice.” Notwithstanding, there is an essential element, also stressed directly and indirectly, as much needed by students: although impossible to include as part of the programme, Arabic language. Each of the programme’s religious teachers have studied Arabic and exhibit various levels of skill with the language in their lectures. However, Yusuf makes it clear that it is vital to a deeper understanding of God’s word.

You cannot study the Islamic tradition without Arabic. You can learn Islam without Arabic. You cannot learn, master this tradition without Arabic. The Qur'ān is an Arabic phenomenon. It can only truly be experienced in Arabic. When you translate the Qur'ān it really does change the experience of the Qur'ān. It's a very subtle book. It takes a long time to grasp the subtle nature of the Qur'ān. (H. Yusuf, lecture, 15 August 2014)

The need for knowledge of the Arabic language is known by students. When queried about the level of importance of Arabic to understand how to live one's life, many students say it is important or very important. However, it remains unclear from their responses how much they believe is enough, and Yusuf does not give any guidance on the matter.

Unlike the other teachers in the programme, Imam Afroz Ali, a religious teacher from Fiji and purported student of Yusuf, does not place refinement of the self as top priority or as a step one must complete before advancing to the next stage. As he teaches students of the legal rulings around family and financial law, he also encourages them to weave themselves into the national tapestry of their countries. "Indigenise your Islam," he implores students. "I'm not suggesting diluting your Islam. I'm saying that your Islam and your actions need to be indigenised. If you don't do that you will have clashes," he says. He is impressing upon students the need to moor themselves and their religious practices in their own communities, so they are seen as being natural to the social landscape. One young woman, a Zaytuna student, sees her Muslim identity as being exactly that, part of the history of the United States.

I think that just as Shaykh Hamza Yusuf says that there are devilish forces, I think there are angelic forces. The youth want to practice Islam more. Being in America is a blessing. Faraz Khan said his shaykh had a dream that the prophetic wind will come to America. It gives you a glimmer of hope. The intention of those who started America was pure. It was based on God. It's not our tradition, but it's still God...the puritans.

Although classes are scheduled to end at 10 in the evening, they often run until much later and students do not arrive back to the dorms until close to midnight. Back on campus they slowly

disperse. Some make a beeline to their beds. Others gather around the teachers that make themselves available before returning to their rooms. These impromptu sessions happen outside the main building, in the prayer room, or in an empty dorm room. The men obviously benefit from the latter as there are no female teachers. Others hang around in an empty room to order pizza and chat. Frequently there is a steady stream of students in and around the main student building.

Students hang around talking or checking their phones on the steps. The groups are not always gender segregated, which causes concern on the part of the organising staff. One evening a young man sits on the steps playing his guitar, prompting another student to pull out his harmonica, and they piece together a soft tune that carries into the night air. They are soon chased away by one of the volunteers who is clearing the crowd around the building. A short time later, sounds can only be heard from the windows of the dorm rooms above.

Ottoman Opulence

After eighteen days of classes, students are excited to travel to Istanbul. As each of the buses pull up to the hotel, the students make their way into the lobby to queue at the tables set up by the staff to provide room assignments and access cards. For the remaining three days, they will visit the various tourist attractions that showcase the height of the splendour of the Ottoman reign. The famous Greek Orthodox basilica—Haga Sophia, Sultan Ahmad Mosque—the Blue Mosque, the Topkapı Palace, and the Süleymaniye Mosque are their main stops.

The group is split up by gender and assigned to one of the four coach buses—two for women, one for the men, and a family bus for the teachers and some of the older students attending with their children. A few of the teachers without family are on the bus with the

students. Before boarding my bus with the other women, Afroz Ali informs the group, “I just want to clarify I’m not going to be able to answer any *fiqh* questions about concubines.” His attempt to head off controversial topics is an effort to avoid complex conversations like the one on slavery in which he was embroiled days prior. The four large tour buses make their way through the small streets of the city over the course of the next three days.

In some ways, the climate of the group alters with the group’s relocation. The sartorial changes are as visible as was the positioning of the young men and women in relation to one another. Many of the women no longer don headscarves or wear them in traditional fashion where one’s head, hair, ears, and neck are covered. It seems that some of the young women adhered to the dress code only as far as the city limits of Konya. During the days, the young men and women laugh and talk to one another openly as they walk the cobbled streets to different sites. During my ride on one of the women’s busses, a few of the young women begin reciting prayers on the Prophet out loud in unison. They attempt to get the others to join in, but their voices are drowned out from the laughter and conversations coming from other students at the back of the bus. On another day their teacher, whom they had listened to most attentively to during class time in Konya, also attempts to reintroduce a spirit of remembrance. After praying the mid-day prayer in the Süleymaniye Mosque, Ali suggests that everyone read ten *salawat* (prayers) on the Prophet. “It is part of *ghafla* (heedlessness) is to return back to what you were on,” he reminds them. The young women stay silent for a few minutes while he is speaking, but their voices return to their previous level when he finishes.

My seat companion is a woman in her mid-thirties, a *Rihla* alum from many years ago. She looks at me and gives me a sad smile at the failed attempt of the teacher. “I don’t think *Rihla*

inspires people the same way anymore,” she says. She tells me she told Yusuf the same thing days before. I inquire about his response and she says he commented that it was a different time with different people but most importantly, “God inspires, not me.” However, this is indeed what people seek from Yusuf and *Rihla*. Days prior Mojaddedi thanked Yusuf in a sign of gratitude for his own spiritual enlightenment. “Thank you, Shaykh Hamza, for inspiring us. You have inspired a generation,” he said. The program website testifies that this is the spirit of tradition they have extracted from the historical of which they seek to emulate.

It was through a rigorous process of transmission and scholarship that Islam was able to inspire generations of people to produce creative and beautiful societies where learning and faith were celebrated and lived...And it is for this reason that Deen Intensive Foundation has concentrated its efforts in this area that is so vital to our communities today. [Deen Intensive Foundation website, n.d.]

At night, students mingle together in the hotel lobby until the early hours of the morning. It is not much in keeping with the ethos of the origins of the programme. However, as much as students are adapting to changing contexts, so is the programme. As I sit in the lobby interviewing Tarsin, the curriculum director, he sadly observes the socialising.

Before *Rihla* people had like...this is sort of...this wouldn't have happened five or years ago, by any stretch of the imagination. Not because of any enforcement, but just because of the culture. These people come with their own culture. I think it's just the social media and they're all about connecting and socialising. Where before, even like break time wouldn't be spent hanging out. I remember break time *Rihla*, five to ten years ago, would be like review notes. Sharing stories of different experiences of studying it was just like...they were there, they were all in.

Here it's an experience. People are posting pictures on Facebook about how cool it is that they're with these scholars. So, it's different. Don't think we're necessarily doing that much that's different. We've changed our expectations, but I just think that students are coming with different background and different psychologies. And it's interesting. Before people came for the *Rihla* and the *Rihla* was the sum of the experience, and I now I think people are coming...the *Rihla* is their background to their experience. It's all about how they're experiencing it. (A. Tarsin, personal communication, 20 August 2014)

Some of the students gather around the teachers who are available in the lobby, hoping to get to know them a bit more, to ask more personal questions, or just be in their company. One group of young women crowd around a teacher and ask him about his family. Another group has moved into one of the smaller seminar rooms of the hotel, converted into the prayer room, and sit on the floor. They ask the teacher to give them some advice and wisdom.

Over the last three days, students slowly bid farewell to departing classmates. Tears flow and hugs go around before the students pass through the revolving doors of the hotel lobby. On the last night in the prayer room, close to fifty students are trying to hold onto their time together for as long as possible. Their short time in the room was one of expression and reflection, as well as advice. One of the young women, a spoken word artist, stands up to perform some poems she wrote to express her feelings. "Some sleep in heavenly peace so that we may wake up," she says. Other students embrace one another as they sit together on the floor. In the end, they all look up to one of the teachers sitting on the chair in front of them, waiting for some last words of advice. He quotes come from an Arab writer who lived during the generation after the Prophet's companions: "Belief is naked, its dress is piety, its ornament is bashfulness and its capital is comprehension." They smile as they collect their things to leave.

Ending the Journey

The buses carry students to the final session, held in a refurbished *zawiya*, one of many Islamic education institutions shut down due to secularisation. It now operates as a nascent university that focuses on educating students about world cultures and civilisations. The students loiter in the courtyard waiting for Yusuf to arrive. It's the last time they will be together and many of them look back on their time with fondness.

I'd like to share that I feel very peaceful, self-reflective, enlightened, and as though the people I've met I have known for my whole life. *Alhamdulillah* (praise God) it's been great. (Student, personal communication, 21 August 2014)

I used all of my vacation. But I don't regret it. Not the time, money or anything. Why? It's a life changing thing. I took three weeks to study Islam. This program made me realise how important community is. Right now, I'm flying solo. I'm going to try and move to maybe Chicago or Dallas. (Student, personal communication, 21 August 2014)

The sense of sisterhood is amazing *alhamdulillah* (praise God). One of the best things about being here is being able to share this intellectual and spiritual journey with so many like-minded, beautiful souls. (Student, personal communication, 21 August 2014)

I have to have the person in front of me then I can feel. I've been watching from home when I couldn't come here. I've been going to ISNA for years and then we went to Reviving the Islamic Spirit, and that was great. And then going to the Sacred Caravan with Shaykh Hamza and being at the site was great. And I feel like coming to *Rihla* tops it off. (Student, personal communication, 21 August 2014)

Close to an hour later, everyone makes their way into the confines of a large room. As the students get settled, the young men begin to chant *salawaat*, the women soon joining in, moving their lips in praise. After a few minutes, each of the teachers are sitting in a row in front of the room and the cameraman is in position at the head of the balcony above. The director of the *zawiyah* begins the session with his parting wisdom. "Know what came before you before you move about. The past illuminates the present," he advises.

Ali is up next. He tells the students to continue asking questions and know that it's okay to be happy, "but you don't have to make videos about it." Here he is stressing the importance of self-monitoring how one consumes and uses social media. His last words are targeted to their knowledge journeys. "Continue to engage in knowledge. Be in company of people of knowledge. [Knowledge] will transform into beneficial action," he says. Ali highlights the importance of being in Turkey. "Istanbul is a living past, versus Europe which is a dead past. Living and positive. Be people who are positive. People of knowledge," he says conclusively.

Yusuf is last to give parting advice. His words are a mixture of his own personal history, which have imbued *Rihla* with a specific pedagogical objective and a confluence of past and present Muslim histories. “*Rihla* was to get out from where you are from,” he says, reminding students of the original purpose of their journey. “Restore the beauty of Islam—that’s my goal,” he says. He draws students’ attention to the beauty in the buildings around them, in Turkey and elsewhere, all by Muslim design.

The most visited place in Europe is the [Topkapı] Palace. In India, it’s the Taj Mahal. In the Middle East, it’s Baytul Maqdis (Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem). Muslims made beautiful things. Now you have Muslims blowing things up. Allah is beautiful and he loves beauty.

His parting advice to students is concise:

Social media is killing us. Take breaks from them. Don’t be a slave to technology. First thing you do in the morning shouldn’t be opening Facebook.

Read something every day from the Qur’ān— *Tabarak, Mulk...Kahf* on Friday;

Keep good company, have *taqwa* and be with truthful people...good company is better than being alone and being alone is better than being with bad company.

No one has all the answers. We have to learn to deal with diversity, political, spiritual...you can find who you want. Too many people have abandoned their conscience for another’s conscience...don’t be a yes man...group mentality is a sickness. There is no rightly guided group...Follow what makes the most sense to you. May the best *da’wah* win! (H. Yusuf, lecture, 22 August 2014).

The visits to two cities, one aflame with the spirits of learned men and another boasting relics of power from former empires, physically make evident *Rihla*’s objective to preserve and disseminate what they see as core sacred sciences of Islam to model previous generations, whose knowledge of Islam inspired generations of people to produce creative and beautiful societies. The words of Rumi’s epitaph are apt, “When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the

earth, but find it in the hearts of men.” It is from these men, these religious teachers of the present, that students seek guidance to navigate the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I show that knowledge and authority are connected through formal instruction by established teachers of specified knowledge from the four main schools of Islamic law, as well as knowledge of spiritual practices that imbue meaning and ethical standards for religious practice. Teachers’ biographies demonstrate that their authority is constructed by foregrounding the *ijāza* tradition as the authentic method of learning, and the importance of proficiency in the Arabic and Persian language to access religious text. Their knowledge of the history and literary works of the people whose city they reside in bolsters their authority.

Teachers transmit knowledge through formal instruction and the delivery of lectures, drawing on a canon of texts from specific Muslim intellectuals of the medieval period. The historical narratives that run through the programme, as seen from the historically resonant location, as well as lectures of the teachers, revolve around history of Ottoman rule. This upward sway of power and its subsequent downfall is attributed to the abandonment of the spiritual fibre of the faith. Thus, they pass on knowledge as it relates to an “Islamic” learning culture, as well as moral and cautionary tales of Islamic tradition. Their reading, at times, projects a pristine Islamic past that is evident in the buildings around them, implying that only people of deep spiritual orientation can produce such beauty.

Teachers mix their lectures with an analysis of the students’ social worlds, stepping beyond the confines of pure legal rulings of the text—what is right and wrong—and moving into a realm of what is considered good religious practice. This is done explicitly by instituting

programme guidelines and activities related to dress, comportment, engagement with social media, remembrance circles, Qur'ānic recitation, eating habits, and the overall use of time, outlining a regime of religious practice for students to replicate when they return home. In subtler ways, the residential and intensive nature of the programme provides an environment for students to observe teachers' behaviours, providing a model for emulation. Teachers encourage students to practice an indirect form of proselytising, being merciful human beings, to create societal change. Students attend to opinions in some cases and reject their advice on how they should engage in the world in other instances. The reverse is also true. This illustrates the various ways in which students contest the authority of teachers, contributing to the developing tradition for their own use, considering the different ways teachers reformulate it for them.

CHAPTER 6: 'PRESSURE MAKES DIAMONDS' – AMERICAN LEARNING INSTITUTE FOR MUSLIMS

Aaron: A Portrait

Aaron was afforded a good education due to the affluent area in which his family lived in Orange County, California. He and his brother are third generation Puerto Rican-Chinese, born and raised in the OC. Growing up with two different cultures and two different homes, after his parents divorced, Aaron says he struggled to achieve balance. His family was distant from religion, “more of a cultural thing and not really observed consciously at all. It was seasonal,” he says. In fact, they were so distant that he self-classified as “borderline atheist, or spiritually atheist.” Early in university, Aaron experienced a personal crisis, one he is reluctant to disclose, which led to his spiritual awakening.

It was after a very difficult argument with one of my roommates. I was going through some hard times at school. I was in the Metro¹⁹ crying about it and all of a sudden, *wallāhī* (I swear by God), something came down and touched my heart and I was totally calm. I wasn't high or drunk. And that kind of *sakīna* (tranquility) out of total pain, I felt...I think today it could have been an angel. I don't know *wallāhu 'alam* (God knows best). That and a series of other things such as, getting into sustainability, seeing the beauty of nature, seeing the alternative narratives to American history, namely, people's history, got me questioning what is truth. So, I was looking into religion for the ultimate truth.

At university, Aaron was a Sigma Phi Epsilon man, a fraternity founded by a Baptist minister, which was denied legitimacy upon its first attempt to register at the University of Richmond in Virginia. The second petition, which required a clear delineation as to how the fraternity differed from other existing fraternities, identified three items – the most salient being that it would be guided by a Biblical ethos, which focused on God's love and peace through brotherhood, rather than becoming a breeding ground for snobbery and elitism, as other fraternities were perceived. Virtue, Diligence, and Brotherly Love (VDBL) are its guiding principles. This ethos, as well as the Balanced Man Program which was instituted in 1991, resonated with Aaron.

It was building balanced leaders of the future. Like you have to balance your temperament. It was a very Aristotelian approach to ethics and morality. Whereas the more holistic you are versus the hierarchy of your spiritual state. So, I really liked that and

¹⁹ Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro)

it felt that Islam was the middle path. So totally in line with the Islamic imperative and balance of the middle path.

Aaron left university at the end of his second year to seek this path at Zaytuna College, after being guided to “Al-Islam, as the Nation of Islam used to call it,” he says. The oneness of God, around which the faith orients, was the key to Aaron’s conversion. “I found that the concept that was always there was the sense of one God...there is one truth, there is one reality. That’s what drove me to Islam. It was the only religion that observed and respected that to its fullest,” he states. After a year of study in this Muslim academic environment, he highlights one teacher who stood out, Imam Zaid Shakir.

[He’s] the only real teacher I’ve seen who lives fully out what he knows, comparatively speaking. Shaykh Hamza, I don’t see the man enough to know what he’s like personally, and I’m his student. And the majority of the country is in the same situation, goes to his lectures, and he’s benefited us immensely when it comes to dissemination and information. But our tradition is a lived tradition, so there have to be scholars that exemplify that lived example. I’ve learned just from being in his company what my dīn is supposed to look like.

Aaron sees this connection between knowledge and behaviour as the basis of Islam. He holds his own community up for judgment for failing to make this connection: “You’ll go to the masjid and the schools, they’ll have Styrofoam cups, plastic bottles, not ethically bought things... the religion isn’t real yet,” he says, in frustration. Aaron’s grievance highlights what he perceives as a lack of true application of Qur’ānic teachings, with blame falling on Muslim educational institutions.

Right now, we’re just trying to get education disseminated...we have Muslims here who don’t even know...very foundational basic things and they’re like in their twenties, almost done with college. Like we need people to know. Another thing is that it has to be understood, what it’s supposed to look like. That’s why the Qur’ān has these very overarching, general, statements. It’s complex, it has a purpose, a message that He [God] wants us to fulfil, like fight in the way of Allah, strive, etc. but how that looked particularly was through the Sunnah of the Prophet *-salla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam-* and you only understand what that really means when you have someone living that out.

He identifies the need for positive role models to exemplify how to operationalise knowledge for the American context. “Your knowledge has to transform you into who you are as a person. How you act with your parents, how you talk to your parents, how you talk to your friends, how you

go to school, how you sit, everything,” he says, pointing to his head. Knowledge has transformed his own life in the past couple of years.

Two years ago, I was drinking and smoking...now I'm here at *ALIM* wearing a *kufi*. I didn't even know I was going to be at *ALIM* until about a month ago. I intended, 'God I just want to know you' and God will put things in your way. That sounds weird and even to me as I say this. I can't believe I'm saying this because I was a total atheist at one point in time but it's real. That's the lived experience... as a convert, I think we're blessed to have that real experience into the tradition so you know this isn't just an idea.

Aaron sees his American convert identity as giving him an advantage over Muslims who were raised in the faith from childhood. It is detached from what he sees as cultural norms from foreign contexts that muddle the idea of how Muslim practice should appear in America. “...everywhere Islam went it was indigenised. Iranian Islam is different from Egyptian, different from Indonesian. That’s the beauty of this religion,” he explains. In this vein, he posits that Islam in America needs to be indigenised. “It has to be,” Aaron says. “Malcolm X was the perfect example. He wore a suit and tie. He understood the concept of house slave, field slave and how that related to [other] concepts. He understood the reality of his world but he was guided by Allah,” he says. So why come to *ALIM*, I ask him, given the robustness of his confessional college? Aaron emphasizes grounding in the tradition and lifelong learning. He quotes his teachers,

There's a quote that Imam Zaid and Shaykh Hamza say a lot: 'One continues to be a student of knowledge until he says I know, then he is lost.' At *ALIM* I've learned some of this stuff and it's like I'm learning for the first time again. Imam Zaid, he's constantly learning; he always has a new book. Shaykh Hamza, the reason why he's so intelligent is because he keeps on reading. He never thinks enough is enough. That's why our tradition is so great cuz they understood the value of knowledge.

Beyond discrete knowledge, *ALIM* provides Aaron with the opportunity to step outside of the campus and surrounding community, which has a concentration of religious scholars. “In Zaytuna we live in a bubble, we're all blessed to be amongst shuyukh in America. No one can really relate to that experience that much,” he says. Furthermore, he believes *ALIM* will provide him with an opportunity to learn how to apply what he’s already learned. “How do I apply this now? What's the world I'm living in and how are these amazing things I'm learning about Islam going to be relevant to the situation I'm in?” he questions.

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Aaron's decision to attend *ALIM* is prompted by his understanding that learning about Islam is a life-long process. His choice to attend was not linked to a teacher in the programme but to supplementing his education at Zaytuna College. His journey highlights a desire to find knowledge that will enable him to create a seamless link between his national and religious identities. *ALIM*, a three-week educational programme, seems like the perfect place for this to occur, as it's set in a historically resonant location for both Arab and African American communities. Teachers use this as a backdrop to discuss the histories of Muslim societies from seventh century Arabia, through the height of the Classical Period and colonialism, up to the post-modern context. By narrating these different histories, teachers move back and forth between the present and past, using a sociohistorical approach to present the development of religious practice through the times. Using pedagogical techniques such as the Socratic method, teachers reproduce knowledge to facilitate students developing what they characterise as a critical religious framework for their daily lives. This results in knowledge being used as a departure point – rather than an end itself. I present the educational histories of a few of the religious teachers in the programme to demonstrate how these factors influence the ways in which they reshape the tradition to provide for the needs that Aaron and his peers communicate. Using these narratives, I identify the elements that contribute to the development of their religious authority and how it is maintained within the American milieu.

A Summer Break

In the suburbs of a city in Michigan, narratives from the life of the Prophet, histories of the Islamic empires, and American Muslims sequentially converge to construct a body of knowledge seen as necessary for the development of Islamically literate and empowered American Muslim

youth. Unlike many institutions started by religious teachers to impart discrete knowledge to students, the American Learning Institute for Muslims (*ALIM*) is a more grassroots project. In 1998, before the mass proliferation of American Muslim institutions that followed 9/11, a group of college students in the greater Detroit area of Michigan identified a need within their community. Their attendance in university courses on Islam and close engagement with their non-Muslim peers provoked a search for ways to reconcile challenges of the modern world with their previous knowledge of Islam. The organisation seeks to “educate and empower Muslims with the requisite knowledge to understand their religion in the light of a changing world.”

The summer programme is structured to provide students with a view of subjects that “invoke tradition, thus empowering the participants with the tools to balance contemporary realities with traditional sciences” (*ALIM* website, n.d.). Delivered by eight teachers, these courses are: The Science of the Qur’ān; Hadith criticism; Comparative Islamic law; lessons from the book ‘Stations of Divine Lovers’ by Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350); Qur’ānic exegesis; Foundations of Islamic law; Shi’ism and Sufism; Islam and modernity; lessons from the book ‘The Poem of Relief’ by Ibn Nahwi (d. 1098); History of Islamic law; Islam and Ethics; the biography of Prophet Muhammad; Islamic Intellectual history; and Islam in America – all couched in Sunni tradition. The programme attempted to deal with doctrinal differences by including Shi’ism on the schedule, however, this was barely addressed.

Outside of the classroom, students engage in group reflection sessions to discuss the lectures or spend time on their own. Additionally, each week, students visit local community

institutions, such as Masjid Wali Muhammad (est. 1954)²⁰; the Canton Masjid; the Islamic Centre of America (est. circa 1950s – said to be the oldest Shi’a mosque in America); the Museum of African American History (est. 1965); and the Arab American National Museum (est. 2005), in an attempt to moor themselves in American history.

Orientation

Arriving from different parts of the country, students encounter a scene of tranquillity at the Catholic university sitting on eighty acres of a wooded campus. A pond with a spouting fountain at its centre sits next to the roundabout driveway at the back of the dormitory car park. Tall trees encircle it from all sides. A gazebo stands behind the pond, a white wooden bench lining its interior. Ducks waddle through the grass and repose at the pond’s shores. The silence is palpable, inside and outside of the dormitory building, even as nuns walk by, speaking to one another in hushed voices. The sounds of suitcase wheels rolling across the pavement, then slamming against the edge of each stair, break the serenity of the environment as students steadily arrive over the first few hours of the day. At the registration desk, set up in the main corridor of the dormitory, arriving students are provided with a key to their room and a code for the building, which is empty except for the programme’s students.

This small group of 16 students have invested money and time to attend, as the programme came highly recommended by peers or family members as one that provides a foundation of Islamic knowledge. Several students articulate a need to develop this foundation

²⁰ “Although located in its current facility on Linwood Avenue since 1954, its first home was on Hastings Street, in Detroit’s “Black Bottom.” It was there that the Nation of Islam was founded by W.D. Fard and led by the Honourable Elijah Muhammad in the early 1930s. The congregation’s name changed from Muhammad’s Temple No. 1 to Masjid Wali Muhammad in 1978, when the Honourable Warith Deen Muhammad led the former Nation of Islam into Sunni Islam. Masjid Wali Muhammad was rededicated as a mosque open for the five daily prayers, with a conventional prayer space (without chairs) oriented toward Mecca” (Building Islam in Detroit Project)

as they are entering their first year of college and want to be able to have a grounding to rely on when they encounter different issues on campus. Others see their time in the programme as a way to establish a basis for their engagement with Islamic tradition within a pluralistic society.

By close to seven in the evening on the first day, the young men and women, separated by gender, sit among three to four rows of tables and chairs in a university classroom. A teacher's desk and chair sit at the front of the room, a green chalkboard at its back, and an exit a few feet away. The right side of the room has an empty space, used for prayer during the day, while the left side has windows that look out onto the pond. An additional two doors are on opposite sides of the room. Two men from the *ALIM*'s board of directors, along with a newly appointed executive director, address the students. Acting as the counsellor for the young men, it is the executive director's first summer programme and he is there to learn the ropes. His introduction is brief, pertaining more to his own background as a Filipino-American convert to Islam, reflecting on his own journey to Morocco, Syria, and Mauritania in the nineties with a group of young American converts who are now amongst the American Muslim intellectual leadership. He comments on the arduous journey that took lots of diligence and hard work but resulted in being able to see the "beauty of *'ilm*" and "taste the pleasure of obtaining *'ilm*."

When the second staff member faces the group, he gives an overview of the history of the organisation and takes pride in acknowledging that the programme's vision remains unchanged, "especially after 9/11, unlike other programmes that needed to rethink how to approach things," in the face of growing public attention towards American Muslims. In acknowledging fellow Americans as their brethren, his advice to students is targeted to their individual selves and the collective. "Take these weeks to learn about Islam. Erase everything you know and re-arrange the

furniture in your minds. You can re-create who you are...a new person when you go back to your community," he says. He highlights a degree of reciprocity that can be expected. "These scholars will learn from you. [And] they are taking time out of their lives to share with you what they know," he explains.

The last staff member mentions what he sees as the impact of the programme on graduates -- 'Alimni,' a play on the name of the organisation, the Arabic word '*ilm*' and the word 'alumni'. Over four hundred students have gone through the programme, many of them working in prominent American Muslim organisations or government positions. There are no statistics on the type of work *Alimni* currently engage in, nor any research that would allow one to make causal claims between the nature of a graduate's success and their attendance of the *ALIM* programme. Nonetheless, the board member goes on to note that "There's some magic to it," referring to the programme outcomes. Quickly realising what he's said, he jokes, "I know magic is haram." Yet, he continues to note that "*ALIM* changes perceptions," not just by providing students with information but "by giving you information to draw out a message and understand how it applies to your life." His message to the students seems to point to the end goal, not the knowledge they will acquire.

When he concludes, I address the group, explaining my research and my reasons for attending the programme. I speak of a perceived desire to present narratives of their experiences on their own terms and contribute to the development of stories within the American Muslim domain. With one exception, each of the 16 students agrees to take part in the study. Dismissed for the night, the young men and women make their way up to the dormitory floors above.

Establishing a Foundation

At 9:20 the next morning, the first session begins. Shaykh Idris will cover the topics of the Sciences of Qur’ān, Hadith, and Islamic law. He stands in front of the group, garbed in a white *jalabiyya*²¹ and matching *kufi*. He smiles at the students and begins with the Qur’ān, which he considers the “mother of Islamic sciences – the first sciences Muslims learned.” Despite more than forty years in the United States, his West African accent is thick. He is the only member of his family to have formally studied Islam. His father was a businessman and a butcher, trading in cows. Neither his mother nor father can read or write the Arabic language. His parents inculcated a sense of morality and ethics around religious teaching, and it was his father who wanted him to be an Islamic scholar. “He took me to many, many shuyukh... He gave them money to make dua for me... his dream became reality,” he says.

Idris completed his primary schooling in Ghana, going on to study Islamic Sciences to act as a spiritual guide for his community. He reveals to the students that his initial work was as a paid healer, providing amulets and special prayers to people for whatever ailed them. They are shocked by his admission. He smiles and laughs at their faces, which are surprised and, in some cases, perhaps even tainted with doubt. Turning to the board, he demonstrates what he used to do. He draws an example of the things he would write in the sand and the different incantations he would recite while doing it to achieve the intended healing aim. The students look on in rapt attention. Few teachers at his level of popularity would care to admit such things, let alone demonstrate them. However, his willingness to do so contributes to establishing a level of trust between the teacher and student. Idris studied for 12 years in Saudi Arabia, acquiring degrees in

²¹ A long sleeved ankle-length garment

Arabic and Islamic Studies. Arriving in the United States in 1982, he studied at the University of Michigan and acquired a Ph.D. in Qur'ānic exegesis.

Idris says his role is to equip youth with the “proper knowledge as we think, the proper knowledge that will make them feel confident and comfortable about themselves and to also be a good product of Islam in this part of the world.” He connects students to a larger tradition by telling the stories of well-known early hadith scholars who travelled far and wide to collect Prophetic narrations. “You travelled from your state to here. You see, the legacy continues,” he says to the students.

After a long day of lectures, the evening reflection session gives students an opportunity to learn about one another. The men and women sit in a broken semi-circle on a set of couches in the lounge area. One of the students brings up the topic of Qur'ānic memorisation from the main session. Students discuss the fact that parents brought from their home countries the practice of memorising the Qur'ān without understanding it. Along with it came corporal punishment. “Hitting in the masjid discourages students from memorising,” says one student. “People in the Muslim world have a harsher life. Hitting is what they do,” says another. They all agree that teaching methods need reform. According to students, this reformation should recognise the importance of memorising the Qur'ān, but should also develop a relevant understanding of the text. “We as Americans are creating our own Islam,” one student remarks. And as such, “it is more important to have understanding,” he continues. Their discussion extends to the qualifications of people, with one student commenting that “People speaking on behalf of Islam have no formal training and are saying whatever they want.” “Some of them have

no formal training -- preaching with hadith and *ayahs* without any education," the student laments.

The lecture on *fiqh* the following day is meant to be cursory, offering an overview of the foundations of Islamic law and the four schools of thought associated with it, unlike other programmes which present detailed guidelines associated with different schools of thought. The teacher doesn't give any one school preference nor does he encourage students to pick one and follow it. In their reflections later, students see the class as too technical and missing a spiritual element. "The spirit of the law needs to be put into education," one student says, once again highlighting the absence of an understanding of the law's inner dimensions. "A *madhab* is only important if you are already on your *din*," a young man comments. One student mentions the need for personal relationships and interactions with the religious scholars, in addition to what is available in book form or online. The question that follows from this, which isn't immediately answered, is how do women get this kind of proximity when popular teachers are overwhelmingly only men? One young woman mentions what she sees as inescapable patriarchy in the law.

It is hard being a part of something like this. This kind of feeling toward women is built into the *fiqh*. I wish I was a guy and didn't have to have that kind of burden upon me with everything. I want to hear a scholar say this is wrong. I'm just so tired. I've been distancing myself from religious discourse and now I'm just so tired of hearing these things. I'm not the type of person that can just say Allah is Rahman Raheem (beneficent and merciful) and it's just going be me and him. I wish I was that type of person. But that's why I'm going to law school because I like to pick things apart to understand them. I can't be associated with something wrong and horrific. I have to find the truth. I don't know, maybe I'll never find the truth, but I have to understand (Student, personal communication, 4 June 2013).

She wipes away the tears falling from her eyes. "I mean, if I didn't understand that, what is the point of even being Muslim?" she queries. "I just hope I don't leave here worse than when I came,

like less peaceful because I was okay with ignoring it," she says. The lack of women scholars on the "speaking circuit" who are of similar calibre to the men who interpret the text is problematic.

That night, the women discuss topics related to Medina's misgivings. "Misogynist parts of the text that are still there?" one young woman says, and she sees the practice of organisations tokenising women speakers as harmful. "For instance," another of the young women says, "I think that putting people like Yasmin Mogahed on the same platform as Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Tariq Ramadan or Imam Zaid Shakir is hurting the cause of women. Only Ingrid Mattson could be up there. Yasmin Mogahed²² is not a scholar." They seem to make a distinction between a popular preacher, Mogahed, and Mattson, who is an academic scholar.

Whilst this discussion continues, an issue begins to develop amongst the male students and it is communicated to the counsellors. Someone has raised a concern regarding the need for gender segregation during the reflection session. The young women are adamant that everyone should remain together, if only for the sake of the young men. "The boys don't want to meet with us and that's a problem. They need to hear what we have to say. The purpose is for there to be an exchange. We can't accept that they will go on and live without women around. So, we should continue to make this like the real world," one of the young women argues. They continue to make their point, highlighting the presence of the one woman teacher, which they believe will result in the men marginalising them from discussion with the teachers who are men. "All the scholars are male and the guys get most of their time," one woman states. They would later ask the young men if they can find a way to share the time. In the days that follow, the young men make a point to

²² A popular motivational speaker.

ensure that they don't crowd the teacher at the end of the lecture and leave space for the women to join group lunch discussions.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that one evening the issue of women scholarship makes its way to the fore of the discussion. The young women proclaim the need to level the playing field between men and women when it comes to knowledge production and acquisition. "How do we institutionalise change," one of them asks. "It's not fair that we have to put in more effort than the men. It's a community problem, not a women problem," one of the women states. The new *ALIM* Director contributes to the discussion. He drops the names of his teachers and the students with whom he travelled, many of whom are popular American Muslim teachers. His response to the young women is not something they want to hear. "Create your own lane. It's going to take a lot of work. I'm not going to come and ask you to fix my house. I'm going to fix it myself. It's my problem – I'm going to fix it myself. You need to own your problem. I'm not making it an issue until it affects my life," he argues. With such a statement, he absolves himself and his male peers from any responsibility in changing the status quo. The young women are surprised by his stance. "So, you're saying 'this', meaning 'this' is a woman's house. That is part of the problem. It's not a community problem," she states. One of the young men pipes up, trying to balance the discussion. "We need to prioritise. If we want a community, then we should put down what the three priorities are and then the community needs to get behind it as a whole," he suggests. The group breaks apart to pray the night prayer. When they finish, the director expresses regret for what he believes was a harsh reaction, citing a headache as a contributing factor. "I'm behind you and I support you guys. Sorry if it was a bit much," he says apologetically.

Later in the evening, the young women take a walk around the campus. They joke about the reflection session, as well as the day's discussion. When we return to the dormitory, the conversation continues in the room I share with one of the young women, a third-year undergraduate student at an Ivy League university. She retells a story of what she says is the "Yemeni conspiracy," where all the new prominent American scholars study in a specific area in Yemen, with certain teachers. "They are starting a new type of Islam for America that is an easy pill to swallow. They are mostly white American converts," she says. "Where does the money come from?" one of the other young women asks. No one seems to have an answer. It's a curious question given the director's statements during the reflection session. These men have been privileged to spend time overseas, often with their families – something few women do. How this is done financially isn't readily known.

Sifting Through the Tradition

After the foundation set by Idris, students begin their journey towards reviewing the historical development of the Islamic empire after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Their teacher is a Chair of an Islamic Studies department in the United States and specialises in Islamic intellectual history. However, his academic training was initially in the sciences. Only after attaining financial success in Silicon Valley did he return to his matriarchal education from Lucknow, India.

My grandmother, on my father's side, she was somewhat of an amazing, very strong personality. She was from... so our family comes from Lucknow in northern India which is an area known for its language and intellectual sophistication. And also, a lot of indo-religious movements started there and so it's a very strong Braveli...that's where Braveli is from... and she was a very independent woman. She was a convert out of Bravelism to ahlul hadith movement. And that meant she had the zeal of a convert. She knew what she was doing. My grandfather couldn't care less, but she was the one that brought everyone to learn this. So, she was seen as somewhat of a teacher, even in the region

where we were. Now, my mother has a slightly different genealogy. Her family is quite educated and more Jamati Islami activist folks. She has a master's [degree] in Islamic Studies. She also learned Qur'ān and the language with a woman teacher who was known in her neighbourhood. So, you know... the way education works sometimes is a woman would devote herself to just teaching the girls of the neighbourhood. That's a kind of school my mother attended. So, I got a lot of that. But most of all I think it was their passion and their interest and sense of priorities that I had. I did most of the reading myself. So that's how they shaped me, but I wouldn't say it was formal education. There weren't books I sat and read with them (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

Dr Owamir Anjum learned Arabic, or what he calls "street Arabic", living in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia at a young age, but also formal Arabic during his days in school.

Most people don't pick up Arabic, but I was interested in it because of Islamic Studies and also because I had a pretty good background because of my grandmother and mother. So, by the time I came to the United States I was fairly well grounded, I would say, in Islamic Studies. But my interest was physics. That's what I loved. My first love (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

He pursued his first love at university and holds degrees in physics, nuclear engineering, and computer science. But the beginning of this academic career wasn't very challenging. Finding it too easy, he says, "I didn't really study for the first two and a half years." Instead, Anjum immersed himself in the American Muslim community.

I spent all of my time at the masjid talking to people, doing MSA work and that stuff, when I realised I couldn't just do physics all my life. I realised I had to do something else. You know, I was always motivated by... I grew up in a very poor neighbourhood in Pakistan and my people remained there. It's a very turbulent place. So those things were always highly motivating and thinking about doing something other than what I always wanted to do. It was just a gradual sense of realisation of what's really important in life. So, I said I need to go back to my Islamic education in a way. But actually, at that point, I was more interested in figuring out western knowledge, right. I came back to [the University of Wisconsin-] Madison to do history. And that was more or less my excuse to sit and learn and do what I wanted to do. If I went to [University of] Chicago, or Harvard [University] or one of the other places, I would probably have to do a lot more of what my advisor wants me to do. One of the great things about Madison was that the advisor was a very good scholar. Just let me do whatever I wanted to do. So, I basically sat and read for five, six years and that was great (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

With the guidance of Michael Chamberlain, a well-known Islamic Studies scholar in the academy, and with the criticisms of Dr Sherman Jackson from his advisory committee, Anjum moved into the academy as scholar of Islam. His role in the secular academy of religious scholarship, along with the role of a teacher on Muslim community platforms, illustrates how Anjum purposely positions himself as a man of belief and critique, both to his religious community and the academy.

I think the very possibility that you can be critically thinking... top of your game, but you can also be a believing Muslim... that's something, for a very long time, that wasn't something that was even possible. You know for the west, there are centuries of Orientalist scholarship on Islam. And really for the first time, the last generation or so, we see large numbers or a substantial number of academics who are also believing. So that's... for me that's one thing that's really important for me for people to see. You can have somebody who is thinking about the material that you think about at school, college, uh... and critically about the world and their belief in Islam and all the other things that come as a result of that... all the other commitments, that they're not a handicap (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

Anjum stands at the front of the room, dressed in casual trousers, a dress shirt opened at the collar, and a suit jacket. He begins by asking the students to introduce themselves. As they take turns speaking, many of the students mention their intended major and the college they attend or will attend in the fall. When anyone makes mention of anything related to Islamic Studies, he asks them about their academic supervisors. His pedagogical approach reflects his position as a university professor. He passes out a handout on the topic for students to follow during the class and consistently suggests books from scholars in the academy related to Islamic history and modernity. His delivery fluctuates between pure English and Arabic “keywords” followed by explanations in English. This technique is deliberate.

Even if people don't understand Arabic people who are in this process of learning, they have to get used to it. They have to develop an ear for it and if they have developed even

a little bit of an ear for it they can remember concepts. And this perhaps comes from my own experience being someone from South Asia where most people who speak Urdu don't know Arabic but they know all Islamic keywords. If you want to teach them Arabic, it's very easy. The same for Persian and Turks and any language of the Islamicate [world]. So, keywords in Arabic are very important. They elicit certain responses, intellectual and emotional, that you want to connect that feeling to those words. When they read the Qur'ān and hadith, they can recognise them. That's the anchor (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

Anjum encourages students to think through their history and the circumstances around the Islamic knowledge that students have been taught from a young age. "You need to understand your history," he tells students. He references the commentaries on the Qur'ān and the sciences associated with its understanding, remarking that this was a later preoccupation of Muslims and that the companions of the Prophet were not engaged in this type of intellectual work.

That's not what early Muslims were, that's not what the first generations were about. These people, in a very short period of time, came to be rulers of the world, right. This is all common knowledge, correct? Well, what happens three centuries later? Fast forward three centuries later and Islam is a very different place and a very different kind of thing, right? Who carries the banner of Islam in say the 10th century of Common Era, 4th century of hijrī era, and then onward? Who are the keepers of Islam? Who are the leaders of Islam? (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013)

He pauses, waiting for a response from the students. "The Umayyads?" someone answers. He guides the students through a brief review of the first three centuries of the Islamicate in what he calls the "formative period," moving on to the centuries of the "classical period," where Islamic thought was consolidated and more directed. He narrates the fall of the Abbasid Empire and its transition into provincial rule.

...the unity comes to an end and at that point, Islam is carried not by the *khulafā'* (caliphs) and the ruling elite and the political leadership but rather it becomes a religion of the 'ulema'. The '*ulema*' become a concrete social force as social leaders of the community, although they were never one corporate body. From this 4th century until about 12th or 13th century of Islamic era, nearly 1,000 years, for that millennium, Islam looks slightly different than it did in the first three centuries. Have you ever thought about that (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013)?

The students remain silent. “What is the implication of that or what are the implications of that? Something that’s carried on by professors?” he asks rhetorically. “Now I’m going to always qualify that. Not all of the ‘*ulema*’ were just professors, but what is gained and what is lost in the process of turning Islam over from leaders of practical men who are leading, managing, you know... uh... charging, to a bunch of professors? What changes?” he asks the students. “Preservation of the *dīn*,” someone calls out. “Preservation of the *dīn* is precisely one of the things that comes about. So, we gain something?” he asks. The students call out different things, “the effects on society,” “a rift between the ‘*ulema*’ and the politicians,” “secularism?” He makes a point to pause here:

Secularism has nothing to do with Islamic history whatsoever. You’re talking about the separation of political authority from religious authority. I don’t think we can talk about secularism until 19th century Europe because secularism is a very different beast. It’s a product of Europe (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013).

After hearing all responses, Anjum guides them to the answer – knowledge production and dissemination.

Islam becomes less accessible to lay Muslims. It becomes more of an endeavour of a certain amount of education. I think that’s a very important insight and development. That Islamic knowledge is more a build-up thing. More sophisticated. And I think sophisticated in both a good and bad sense. It’s more complicated knowledge, doesn’t mean it’s more effective or accessible. It’s less accessible to people, yet at the same time, you see a lot of conversion to Islam. Mass conversion to Islam, according to historical data we have of the third and fourth centuries. Expansion of Islam continues in different ways, but Islamic society becomes very stratified and hierarchical and by the fifth century you come to have strict distinction between the ‘*ulema*’ or the ‘*āmmah*’ (laymen). Al-‘*āmmah*’ included the majority, and the ‘*ulema*’ were limited to really just the cities. Which means you have to go to one of the 20 major cities of Islam to find any interesting scholarly activity. But the majority of people in the pre-modern world lived as peasants inside of the city. And of course, the Islamic world was one of the most civilised places. Meaning a “cited” place... nonetheless, the majority still live outside. What did this majority do? How did they practise Islam (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013)?

He moves on to an explanation of the “vernacularisation” of Islam in different regions: Islam translated into local languages. Conversions occur on a mass level but not under the rule of the caliphate, rather at the hands of provincial rulers who treat the caliphate as a figurehead, resulting in the fragmentation of the Islamicate. In moving towards more localised expressions of Islam across the historical development of the Muslim world, the ways in which knowledge is transmitted move away from *madrasa* dominance.

One of the young women queries the relationship between colonialism and education: “With colonialism, there was a rupture in Islamic education. What is the new model for traditional Islamic education?” “I don’t think we have one triumphant model,” Anjum responds. He expounds further by revisiting the history of educational institutions in Egypt and Saudi Arabia which, he says, “combine teaching some version of traditional texts with some form of modern education.” He touches on the Deobandi movement in India who, he says, “provide a very strong Arabic/Islamic curriculum with some modern knowledge.” Furthermore, he asserts that there isn’t “something magical” about the madrasa system, which was only secondary to the learning that took place in mosques and personal homes of scholars in the medieval era. Anjum sees the model developing organically, from the fundamentals of Islam. “Learn your dīn. Teach your dīn,” he advises. “The best of you is who learn their dīn and teaches it,” he quotes from the Prophet. But who should be teaching? One student says, “I think there is a fine line between those who can teach the dīn... where you know the limits?” It brings to light one of the objectives of *ALIM*: to provide students with a level of literacy which can serve as a source of evaluation for the multitude of voices in the sphere of Islamic knowledge production.

A lot of times people are talking and acting as if they really know a lot because there is no one to correct them. Because of the scarcity, you have this problem. There is a need for

education at a very basic level and we have, I think we have failed in educating people in a way that is compassionate. Because there are people who talk about tradition and then they put down the actual living Muslims. Tradition was great, golden, beautiful, shining. Muslims who are living, dying for something, they are belittled. We have to bridge that gap between folk that are coming from ground up talking about real Muslims and for those talking who are engaged in tradition. There are very few people that will try to talk with both sides (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

In analysing this history with students, Anjum seems to suggest that there was a height of intellectual production and one of the young women picks up on this. “There was a moment of perfection and everything else is going down? Is this at odds with notions of progress... because then we will never get there,” she says. Anjum’s answer is solemn. “You will have good times, but you will never have anything as good as then. This is what you get when you believe in the last messengers,” he states. The young woman’s forehead scrunches up. “I think there is a problem with this paradigm,” she later remarks.

In addition to his exploration of intellectual history, Anjum uses a classical Arabic text, *Madārij al-Sālikīn* (Stations of Divine Lovers), to mediate the relationship with the divine.

It’s a text that brings all kinds of Muslims together. There’s one thing that Muslims can come together on is that we need to be closer to Allah. Life needs to have meaning. You’re going to meet Allah... so in that sense, it has a bit of this advantage that it can bring people to talk about something that truly matters. The heart of Islam. And it brings people together. Salafī, Sufī, Ikhwanī, whatever you are. There is an element of this really cheapening – discourse of *taṣawwuf*. *Taṣawwuf* has become a brand. You either love it or hate it. There are just tremendous misconceptions around what it’s about. What it’s for. Its history. People are trying to sell it. People are trying to sink it. So... I thought it would be a good text to teach (O. Anjum, personal communication, 6 June 2013).

According to the course notes he provides for students, the text is “... essentially a Qur’ān-based evaluation, critique, and rehabilitation of the first several centuries of Sufi wisdom.” His review of the text outlines a five-step programme for spiritual renewal: 1-awakening and repentance; 2-remembrance; 3-patience and gratitude; 4-morals and manners; and 5-love.

When finished, Anjum recognises that much of what he's said may be hard for students to digest but he reasserts his intentions. "I've presented what I feel is beneficial to you. I want you to understand why people oppose something. You're not off the hook by saying it's within the tradition... you are still responsible to sift through it," he advises. However, there is a recognition that students may have to follow those who know if they do not know.

The lowest level of taqlīd (following) is that you just follow based on your fitra and Allah knows your intention. When you know the Qur'ān, you have to judge those authorities based on what you know. Not replace them. Not deny their authority. You can't turn off your mind and say you will follow. If you are not a student of knowledge you look at the ethics [of religious authorities (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013)].

His gives advice both in relation to knowledge and how students should act in the world.

Take the Islamic tradition, learn it critically, not like zombies and happy capitalists. Learn it and become model citizens. A life based on indefinite consumption is destructive. Real Islam is that which is put into practice. -- Knowledge must be combined with human interaction. It means something. You have to live your life in order to understand the Qur'ān. [So] stay connected with the modern world and undermine the presumptions of the Muslim world (O. Anjum, lecture, 6 June 2013).

Anjum's words push students to understand that the Qur'ān cannot be understood in abstract. They must reflect on their everyday engagement in American society as ethical religious citizens, while simultaneously presenting a counter narrative to the dominant voices in Muslim-majority contexts.

Challenging the Tradition

With class beginning at nine in the morning, ending in the early evenings, followed by an hour reflection section, and night chats between students in their dorm rooms, it was normal to see students straggling into class late each day. Some of them pause at the designated food table at the back of the room to check if any hot water remains for a cup of coffee to give them a much-needed boost. By the seventh day, students had received lectures on foundational

sciences of the Qur'ān, hadith, and jurisprudence. It was a preparation of sorts for much of the harder work to come. "IMF breaks you down and then Dr J comes and builds you back up again," one of the staff members says about the relationship between the two teachers "IMF", the nickname given to Imam Muneer Fareed and "Dr J" Dr Sherman Jackson. Both have strong roots in the Michigan community where the programme has been based for the past fifteen years.

Fareed, originally from South Africa, arrived in the country with the support of a mosque which was searching for an imam. At the recommendation of a South African family in the community, he was invited to be the imam of the Islamic Association of Greater Detroit. His path of religious learning took many twists and turns. His family is of Indian descent and they are familiar with religious learning, although his parents were not in the business of seeking knowledge. As a young man, Fareed spent four years at King Abdul Aziz University in Mecca, completing an undergraduate degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Thereafter, he enrolled in what he calls, the "Oxford of South Asia," in terms of Islamic Studies; The Deobandi Dar-ul-Uloom in South Africa. The *madrasa* educational institution was founded in the mid-1800s by an Islamic movement in India. It is still in operation, now with schools in numerous countries implementing its curriculum, structured to teach the revealed sciences with a Hanafi view of Islamic jurisprudence. It was an interesting place for Fareed who followed the Shafi'i school of thought but lived in a community with heavy Deobandi influence. After graduating from the Dar-ul-Uloom, Fareed travelled to Cairo to study undertake post-graduate studies, before returning to South Africa to teach at his alma mater. During his time as an imam in the United States, he completed a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies. Even with his educational history up until that point, he admits that he didn't quite know why he was doing a Ph.D. Nonetheless, he went through with it

because it was characteristic of the scholars who inspired him. This new trajectory further added to the complexity of Fareed's intellectual development. His previous religious studies occurred in Islamic institutions in Muslim-majority countries and a Ph.D. placed him in a secular institution.

The difference would mean developing what he calls the "eye of the sceptic."

The basis of study for study of any religion, not just Islam in academia, is that you approach your area of study with an open mind and you do so with a certain objectivity and impartiality, which obviously is the eye of a sceptic. Whereas when you enrol in an Islamic institution you are doing so for affirmation, confirmation, enrichment, endorsement, it's never about validation, well maybe validation. So, your approach is very different (M. Fareed, Diffused Congruence, 7 February 2014).

Thus, Fareed's approach is direct and confrontational, challenging students in ways that many of them have not previously experienced. "[Y]ou kind of feel out the audience. Once you know you have kind of a good crowd here then you can push them. You push them as fast as they can go. You feel them and push them," he says. When he begins his sessions, garbed in a short-sleeved shirt with the top few buttons undone over dark trousers, he immediately demands that students drop notions he believes have hindered their ability to think critically about the faith and behave in an informed manner. He tells them to forget everything they learned in Sunday school and goes further to say, "The quicker you disabuse yourself of the romanticised notion of Dar-ul-Islam, the better."

He pinpoints one of the main narratives presented in learning about Islamic history: the rise and fall of the caliphate. However, Fareed's fused intellectual development recognises the importance of some notion of tradition. "Our tradition is a *naql* (transmitted) tradition," he says, discussing the development of the tradition from an oral one to a written one, outlining the chain of custody of hadith transmitters. He makes it clear that time has removed Muslims from a direct relationship with the Qur'ān. "We are no longer 'asr (time epoch) Qur'ān. Kids don't know

what they believe in. This is the age of disbelief. God is disconnected from creation and the Qur'ān doesn't resonate with this generation as it did in the previous generations," he says.

With this understanding of students' lived reality, Fareed outlines the challenge of the current generation – "Identifying what part of the tradition is related to Arab society and what part of it is timeless?" Furthermore, he says, "Surely everything in the text is not timeless." It's a bold statement to make and the silence from the students shows a bit of their discomfort at his words. How can God's word not be timeless? Fareed begins to demonstrate to students the contours of the critical framework he hopes to instil.

The purpose is not to apprise you of details, but to instil relevance. [To] get the tools to think correctly. Remove the cobwebs and you will find the answer. To empower you. This is the local market, not McDonalds. We don't make burgers and give them to you. We put you in the market and you go and buy some fruit and vegetables (M. Fareed, lecture, 9 June 2013).

In the market, Muslims are constantly confronted with different individuals who act as interlocutors for the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Fareed focuses on this point, urging students to pay attention to the religious discourse and the ways in which people implicitly bolster their image of authority. "People say 'the Qur'ān says...'," Fareed notes. He distinguishes this between non-religious talks, where one might say, "If I understand you correctly..." He concludes, "We have a tendency to misunderstand, except in the case of the Qur'ān." Fareed argues that the first statement is used to add emphasis to their argument, "to make sure there is no different understanding as to undermine their authority. If someone says, 'In my opinion, the Messenger of Allah said...' – You let the cat out of the bag," Fareed states. "Every reading of the Qur'ān is an opinionated reading, informed through formal education, life experience, or intuition," he explains. Therefore, in Fareed's reading of history, "our ancestors were cognisant of this so they said *'wallāhu 'alam.'*"

In communicating this, Fareed seeks to establish a link to Islamic tradition, which will enable students to understand their role in contemporary times. “You’re Muslim. You’re American. And you’re in America. This informs your understanding of the text,” he states. He echoes one of the young women’s realisation during her time in the Middle East studying Arabic, “I learned I was an American when I went to the Muslim World,” she says in reflection. Further deepening this connection with their sociocultural context, Fareed emphasises that Islam must exist in a culture, leading to the conclusion that there is “No such thing as an Islamic identity, only Muslim identity.”

Despite the idea that the boundaries of orthodoxy are fixed, Fareed asserts that its contours change if the overwhelming majority agree. He uses the idea of the United States constitution as an example. “The constitution is fixed, but we believe it can change with the overwhelming majority,” he says. Fareed posits that notions related to aqīda are “a development of history, not divine or prophetic. [It is] good marketing sold at different times depending upon the issues of the people,” he says.

During the first break from Fareed’s lectures, students chat about his delivery. “He puts things in categories that are too polar – simple and complex,” one says. Anjum’s previous lectures resonated more, given that the topics which he addressed were built upon knowledge of history and intellectuals with whom the students are familiar with. Others are concerned about where this path is taking them. “I came here with all these questions and things shaky. And now I feel even more unsettled. Like I’m homeless,” another student says.

As the day wears on, Fareed provides a social analysis of the situation of American Muslims. “Kids don’t know what they believe in. This is the age of disbelief. God is disconnected

from creation,” he says. As a result, “[the] Qur’ān doesn’t resonate with this generation as it did in the previous generation.” It’s unclear what generation Fareed is referring to and what “resonates” implies. Based on the statements of students, it isn’t so much that the Qur’ān resonated with their parents but that their parents perhaps didn’t question it in the same way the post-9/11 generation does. Nonetheless, Fareed positions himself as working “to convince children that their values aren’t problematic to the tradition they follow,” he says.

At the end of his sessions the tenor of the classroom is one of unease. “My mind feels like spaghetti!” one of the students exclaims. After years of engaging with students, Fareed is aware of their unsteadiness. It is this strategy that paves the way for the teachers that will lead the subsequent sessions. He reminds students of one more challenge they face: “How to mend yourself after you have been dismantled?” His advice, interspersed throughout his lectures, serve as a set of guidelines for students.

Speak slowly and enunciate. Have confidence in what you say. Don't give disclaimers. Only add to the discussion, don't just talk... Your preferred position is to remain silent. Do not engage in meaningless banter and MSA (Muslim Student Association) talk. If you want to confront someone on what they are saying, educate yourself. Make a mental note and go home and hit the books. Do not engage Muslims in polemics. You will always come out the loser (M. Fareed, lecture, 12 June 2013).

Fareed leaves behind more questions than answers. “Why didn’t I ask any of these questions before,” one student remarks. Another says, “He didn't necessarily answer the questions I had, he just asked better, broader questions, and then gave me ways to go find answers to them for myself. He was very engaging and applied the balanced, critical approach to the frameworks of tradition and authority that I had been looking for.”

On the last day of his time in the programme, students gather outside with him to take a picture. The summer warmth is tempered by the coolness of the swift fall of rain beating against

the awning attached to the side of the building. The students huddle together, Fareed at the centre, while the photographer snaps away. As the group breaks apart, Fareed gives a brisk farewell and sets off. In hopes of avoiding the downpour, he sprints towards his car. A few of the students are surprised by his quick departure and what one can only assume is an insufficient goodbye. They run after him in the rain with the photographer capturing their pursuit.

Mooring in America

The Detroit metropolitan area is home to large Sunni and Shi'i Muslim communities. On the first Friday, students receive lectures during the morning and will spend the rest of the day exploring the histories of these communities. Everyone is dressed in their Friday best and many of the students are scattered around the front area of the campus engaged in some sort of *dhikr*. One young man sits on the edge of the driveway reading from a Qur'ān. Another student walks back and forth along the edge of the pond with the beads of a *tasbeih* moving through her fingers. Eventually, the women pile into one van and the men into the other. When we arrive at the mosque, students take pictures of the sign that reads, "Masjid Wali Muhammad." Everyone removes their shoes, placing them on the shelves that line the walls in the foyer, and they climb the stairs to the carpeted prayer space above. The young men and women split off to the front and backs of the room, respectively, and proceed to make supererogatory prayer before the Friday sermon begins. After the sermon, the students remain behind as the rest of the congregation pours out. Making a circle, they settle in to listen to the imam deliver a short talk to them about the history of the mosque.

The community was formed around the mosque, formerly known as Temple Number 1 Mosque in the 1930s, after having existed primarily in the homes of its members. "We consider

ourselves Muslims, not any ethnic or racial sect distinction,” the imam says. In 1975, the community moved away from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He remarks that Warith Deen Muhammad asked everyone to take shahadah and the community was “taught in a way that broke away from what was taught before and taught in the Sunni way, the way Allah wanted.” “What was the structure of the edifice when Elijah or Malcolm X were here?” asks one of the students. In response, the Imam says they bought the building from a Jewish community and they didn’t change much of it. He points to the front of the room where a stage used to sit. “We sat in chairs and didn’t make prayer in the Islamic way,” he says. Nonetheless, he articulates that they are indebted to Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X who taught in the mosque.

We were at the bottom of the socioeconomic level of America. Farad wanted to deal with race relations because we were similar to the untouchables in India. He convinced us that our legacy was that of great people in Africa. He made us think that because Africa was so rich, we were strong, so they used us like animals to work the plantations. Hard, laborious work. We are all different colours because of the white man. America was built on the backs of slaves from Africa for more than 200 years. Anyone would be rich from that. During that time, we produced many men and some women who were against that. There were disruptions and troubles. It finally led up to the civil war. The white brothers who just wanted to help us get out of that slavery position. We love America, we realise it was the will of Allah. Our goal is to bring a more just position to all mankind, starting in America first. You are all from the east so we are taking the lead. Islam will be the only religion to do this (Mosque imam, lecture, 7 June 2013).

“We understand some of the Nation of Islam doesn’t agree with Islam,” he says. However, he stresses the need for community work so people don’t just come to the mosque on Friday. In addition to more outreach to other communities, he hopes the community strives in a race towards good. “Our goal is to bring a more just position to all mankind, starting in America first... *shaytan* (Satan) is whispering in people’s ears to kill people. We have to work to bring peace... freedom, justice, and equality,” he ends.

The next stop for the day is the Museum of African American History. It's an apt visit given their time at the former NOI mosque. When the students enter, they are asked to stand in a circle with their feet around the edges of a globe painted on the floor. They listen to an introduction by one of the museum staff before they make their way around the museum. They are presented with images, short documentaries, and artefacts that show the history of slavery in America. Aaron takes notes in a notebook as he walks around. The gravity of the history is enough to keep the group pretty silent throughout. After their visit, *ALIM* staff lead a walk around the downtown Detroit, with stops at an abandoned conservatory and the Port of Detroit. Many of the young men and women laugh and talk with one another despite the prohibition of intermingling. However, when they arrive at a pizza parlour for lunch they sit at gendered tables.

By their next outing, the following Friday, students are more comfortable around one another. The no-fraternisation rule – “To maintain the integrity of the programme, we require that all social interaction between genders, especially individual interactions, be strictly avoided” – as written in the programme booklet, is constantly circumvented and some see it as contrary to the goals of the programme itself. After the congregational prayer at another mosque, students enjoy lunch at a local restaurant. They sit on separate, but close, tables. After the meal, a few break off from the group and sneak to get ice cream at the Carvel next door. Reassembled in two vans driven by staff, the group makes a pit-stop at a shopping centre for some essentials.

Back on campus, the director is nowhere to be found. The students are left under the direction of the women's counsellor. I relax on a bench looking out at the fountain splashing water into the pond. Noor, one of the young women, joins me a bit later and we discuss the issue of scholarship and the types of leaders in the community. By her assessment, there are

civically engaged pastors, academic scholars, and motivational speakers. “Do we have public intellectuals like Cornel West or Noam Chomsky?” she asks. “Maybe Tariq Ramadan,” she answers herself. A few of the other students walk around the pond, talking on their phones. Medina sits on the bench doing dhikr. Another young man and woman are walking back and forth, talking. The rest of the young men are playing soccer on one of the grassy fields. Two of the young men come over to where Noor and I are sitting and talk about their personal lives.

When dinner arrives, most of the students sit with one another, eating and chatting. Four of the young men keep their distance from the women in the group. As the sun sets, the students place two sheets on the grass to line up for prayer. One of the young men makes the call to prayer, his voice filling the silence of the night air. Another student stands up in front of the group to lead and everyone is silent as the prayer begins.

Re-evaluating Existing Norms

With seven days of the programme remaining, Dr Ingrid Mattson makes her way into the morning session late. She’s a petite white woman no taller than five feet and three inches. Her white headscarf is tucked into a blue pinafore dress with a white blouse underneath and white trousers. Her sandals make hardly a sound as she walks to the front of the room. It is a new experience for the students, the first woman teacher they’ve encountered in the programme. Upon seeing her name on the schedules, one student is excited by the chance to finally study with her. “I’ve had a crush on her for a long time,” Hanif, a budding doctoral student, exclaims to me, as he talks about how impressed he is with her scholarship and how she is the “ideal woman.” Others are apathetic given their unfamiliarity with her work. Then there are the sceptics, who lamented about having had enough of hearing a woman talk about women. “I

wonder what topic Ingrid Mattson is talking about. It better not be a woman's issue. I'll be so annoyed," one of the young women remarks given that "TBD" is written under her name in the programme schedule.

Mattson's positioning as a teacher is unique. It is uncommon to find women teachers at her level of educational and experience holding a prominent role in any mixed-gendered residential religious intensives, let alone being a common feature on the lecturing circuit. I question one of *ALIM*'s board members about the dearth of women teachers in the programme. "There are women scholars and we have a pool to choose from," he responds, not falling into the oft-heard complaint that there aren't any women scholars. However, he expresses that much of the problem boils down to timing and scheduling, in addition to discerning whether the women available can teach relevant programme subjects. Thus, it is about maintaining the level of the programme. He says, "We don't want to jeopardise the esteem of the scholars, so we try to choose those who are as experienced."

Listed on Jordan's Royal Institute for Strategic Studies (RISSC) "500 Most Influential Muslims" since its debut in 2009, Mattson is a prominent scholar in national and international circles, making her a coveted speaker, even if Muslim organisations often tokenize women scholars. She grew up as the sixth of seven children in her family, during the early sixties in a Roman Catholic community in Ontario, Canada.

I used to go to the convent for piano lessons and other things. I just really admired their commitment to poverty, charity and service, and all of these things. At the same time, I saw how different it was from the priests and the rectory. On the same block, you had women who were living in the convent. Simple rooms, Simple lives. Working together, cooking, [and] cleaning, collectively. And you'd go to the rectory and there were three or four priests there who were living in luxury with multiple servants, who did everything for them, fancy cars, carpets that were so plush that would leave a footprint in it if you were walking on it. And we had a paedophile priest also, that molested many kids in our

community. So the contrasts, how on the one hand you could have people who clearly got it, who understood what service to God meant and were living a life that really reflected that beauty and then, on the other hand, to have people who could distort the exact same religion and even use their religious authority and charisma, you know the charisma of the priests who is the... who has this special status, you know, in Roman Catholicism, who is ontologically different from everyone, who is the only one who can have the sacrament... using that power to hurt people? So, there was such a contrast for me. So, I've kept aware of that. Kept aware that there is always the potential for either in a religious tradition. I've been aware of it in Islam and I think it gave me a realism, but also not being demoralised believing that we could do better, that we could change (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013).

Mattson's religious orientation changed while she was a student at university. As a philosophy student in Waterloo, Canada, her degree programme included a study-abroad requirement. She spent time in Paris and encountered a group of West African Muslim students with Sufi leanings. When she returned to Canada a year later she converted to Islam. After her conversion, she came across Fazlur Rahman's book 'Islam,' first published in 1966 by the University of Chicago Press, where Rahman taught. It would be the beginning of her path to Islamic scholarship.

At this point, Mattson left Canada to work in refugee camps in Pakistan. While setting up a midwifery programme, the impact of Rahman's work was still on her mind. She wrote to him, asking if he would accept her as his student. Upon receiving his encouragement, she applied and was successful. However, Mattson deferred for a year to ensure the health programme she was developing was on its feet before her departure and it was during this year that Rahman died. Mattson returned the following year and went on to obtain her Ph.D. in 1999 from the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago.

The different leadership positions she's held in the North American Muslim community are informed by her formative years as a Christian in Canada.

There is some truth to what my professor told me when I became Muslim. That a lot of it has to do with my formation outside of Islam, in a family where there was no question

that I would succeed as a woman. That I would be ambitious as a girl. That my parents really celebrated my success, where I was a competitive athlete, I was a competitive swimmer, field hockey player. I've worked since I was 14 years old. And that includes waitressing, working in a meat factory, tree planting in northern Canada. You know, really stretching myself in terms of my comfort level. Being in difficult circumstances. Being able to be alone. Do physical work. I'm being challenged. All of those things made it possible, I believe, for me to maybe step into situations that a lot of Muslim women, I think, aren't prepared to step into. I don't think they... some Muslim women are just overprotected by their families, by their communities and I'm not saying they don't have to be careful with their kids, but we also have a lot of capacity to growth and strength that I think is underdeveloped. And so that's something that I think we need to pay more attention to (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013).

Acknowledging that the challenges many Muslim women face prohibit their future engagement fully within society, provides a background to understanding Mattson's focus on ethics, gender, and delving deeper into understanding the function of the Qur'ān.

Despite her late arrival, when she enters the classroom, everything changes. After apologising for being late, she asks, "Can we turn off the camera?" The young college student recording the daily sessions gives her a hesitant look. Surprisingly, none of the programme staff are available to sanction her request. One of the young women comments on how rude it is that the day the only woman teacher is lecturing, none of the volunteer staff are onsite. Mattson repeats her request and, having no other choice, the cameraman stops the recording and begins to break down the tripod and put away the equipment. Turning back to the students, Mattson questions them about topics already covered. After years of being in a university classroom with young students, her teaching style is far from didactic. They throw out one-word subject descriptions. Mattson then proceeds to outline how she will structure her sessions.

By participating in the programme, Mattson contributes to the intended aim of developing a structure for Islamic literacy. Her contribution centres on the knowledge she identifies as being necessary for a Muslim and the practices that exemplify a specific sense of

being in the world.

“The minimum that is required is to understand the basics of belief, the required beliefs - theological beliefs. To be able to open up the Qur’ān, read it and understand what the Qur’ān is, the context of the Qur’ān. After that, what you need to be able to live ethically as a Muslim. A lot of Muslims are very sincere, they want to become better Muslims, so they go and study the law. They study *fiqh* and study deeply into a *madhab*. And very often it results in having a lot of knowledge that has very little relevance to their lives. What I want is to connect the norms that we find throughout Islamic teaching, whether it is in traditional *fiqh* or the reformist tradition or other sources like books of *adab* and all sources of other traditions, to how we should relate to people. How we should relate to creation. How we should engage as consumers in society. I think the problem is, that so much that is being taught is removed from the way we exercise power in our lives. So, I’m concerned about how we relate to other people and the rest of society and where those Islamic teachings come in” (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013).

Mattson demonstrates one way in which such a relationship is established in the classroom. She instructs the students to rearrange the placement of the tables and chairs in the room. “It’s better to have a circular organisation of seats. It’s important to see and hear each other when talking in the classroom, rather than having the Nile River between the sexes,” she says. Soon the desks and chairs are arranged in a square – more seminar style. Happy with the arrangement, Mattson affirms, “Sometimes it’s good to change seating and it’s good for learning.” Her initial focus is on having students create “an understanding of terms, situation, and the context in which we live,” so that they can conduct what she sees as a risk assessment framework for how to engage with the world. In this way, she hopes they can engage with the Qur’ān, which she says is “is about your connection with Allah. You need to find the potentiality of yourself within that.”

After the first break, Mattson looks outside and decides to take advantage of the summer weather. She instructs the students to move outdoors for the rest of the session. As everyone reaches to collect their belongings, Aaron brings Mattson a glass of water. She thanks him and

they both walk outdoors. His gesture stands out. None of the other teachers received such attention. I catch up with Aaron to ask him about it. He pauses for a few seconds and shrugs. “I guess because many of my teachers are women and I just think it’s a sign of respect,” he says nonchalantly, referring to his teachers at Zaytuna College. However, it’s not a sign of respect shown to the male teachers. And the young men continue to assist her, moving her chair, books, and getting coffee for her during the sessions.

The students settle around the semi-circle of the gazebo. Sitting on a stool, Mattson faces them and the jets of water shooting up from the middle of the pond behind them. A statue of St Francis sits at her back. She makes an interesting picture, sitting on a stool with two young men on the floor by her feet. One looks out towards the pond, the other, Hanif, looks up at her with adoration shining in his eyes, as she begins to speak. Over the course of her sessions, Mattson doesn’t consistently use Arabic phrases. When she does use religious terminology using Arabic language, she says the English, then the Arabic. It’s a curious practice given that Arabic is often used to demonstrate one’s interpretative authority. Mattson disagrees with its use in a teaching capacity.

I don’t assume that everyone knows Arabic, so I give the Arabic term for those who might know it and for clarification so they can know what I’m talking about if there is any ambiguity in what I’m talking about. But I give preference, I try to speak English to people. I think it’s important. It connects us better with our ordinary life. Most of us living in America are speaking English to everyone else and I want us to be comfortable saying ‘God bless you’. I want to be able to say, ‘Thank God’ when I’m in normal conversation with people of other faiths. I want to be able to express what I mean in a way that the language is clear and as understandable and not talk to people that don’t know Arabic and using Arabic expression. What am I communicating? There’s a certain, uh, people want to appear authentic and it’s the creation of a certain charisma and even... I don’t think it’s necessary to first recite a verse in Arabic and then given the translation in English unless there is some benefit in that. In my prayer, yes, I’m going to recite in Arabic. But if I’m simply giving a lesson, unless the Arabic is relevant and people really know it, I’m not going to recite it just to prove that I’ve got that kind of credential. When

scholars teach there's a performative aspect as well and to me, the medium is the message. And one of the things I refuse to do is to force myself into a model of a scholar that is like them so that I will be accepted like a traditional scholar. Because that will continue to privilege a certain kind of performative aspect and education and knowledge that I think is part of our problem. I really believe that... I refuse to be that. I want to demonstrate in the way that I am that there is a different way to... that you can learn and have some confidence speaking about Islam that doesn't require you to become an Arab or to adopt a certain style of dress (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013).

Relatedly, this personal and pedagogical orientation towards the language can also be seen in her view regarding the role of Arabic in the life of the average Muslim.

I think ordinary Muslims need Qur'ānic Arabic to the extent that they can recite the Qur'ān. Open the Qur'ān and read it. You can do that by the time you are eight or nine years old. There are lots of people who have memorised the Qur'ān before they were 10 years old. Beautiful *tajweed* (Qur'ānic recitation) everything. After that, I honestly don't think Arabic is required. I don't think Muslims need to know Arabic. There are lots of people all over the world. Arabs are a small set of the Muslim population. As a scholar, if you really want to engage in scholarship then you need Arabic. But for ordinary Muslims, I don't think Arabic is that important (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013).

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Mattson dedicates time during her break from academic teaching at the university level to participate in the *ALIM* programme.

What I like about it is that it is not narrowly ideological and also, I like the social environment of it. I think it's respectful but relaxed. I like the idea of Islamic literacy. I think it's empowering. I like the idea that I know that there are so many Muslims who have a Sunday school view of Islam and get to university, and I've been a university professor, so I see that confusion that is created when Muslims come out with a Sunday school version of Islam and then get into an Islamic Studies class and they think they are going to learn about the religion and they are just shocked by what they hear. So, I think it's an important obligation we have to provide this kind of education. It allows them to continue with what they do, their normal studies but it's not just some kind of weekend workshop or one-off lecture. It really gives them something substantial that I think can help them. So, I really like the philosophy behind it. That we're not trying to force people into a particular school of thought other than a broad mainstream Islamic thought, but empowering them with tools so they can continue to grow. And it's done in a really effective way. I'm very interested in outcomes, at the end are people coming out better than they were before (I. Mattson, personal communication, 16 June 2013)?

She tells students, "instead of having rules, let's have relationships." She encourages students to

re-evaluate stories which they have encountered in their religious learning that are understood solely from a masculine perspective. When she remarks upon the notable companions of Prophet Muhammad, she mentions the good and the bad. In one example, she tells students how one companion was known to beat his wife. The students are stunned. It is uncommon, if not unheard of, for students to hear anything but good about this righteous generation. Mattson pushes them to determine the cognitive frames for their beliefs. “We have literature that makes the companions into saints. There are no saints,” she clarifies, placing focus not on the sources students have for knowledge about these historical figures. Mattson aims to create a space for students to comfortably and ethically practice their faith amongst one another. It is this conclusion that she takes from the companions of Prophet Muhammad. “[The] sahabah were the greatest generation because of their collective effort. [We] need a broader understand of the greater story – that we have a community of flawed individuals that are striving.” Mattson further asserts that the Internet is one of the biggest problems plaguing Muslim youth, given the vast amount of unverified information available and, thus, she sees her role as making Islamic tradition relevant to people.

[Linking Arabia and America – “Does everyone understand what I mean by that?”](#)

When Dr Sherman Jackson begins his session, he jokes to students, “Relax, you won’t walk out of here feeling like you’re not Muslim.” The students nervously laugh, though the uncertainty felt from Fareed’s sessions remains. Jackson’s remit for the next five days is large, but also the most crucial. His lectures will cover the Prophet Muhammad’s biography, Sunni Islamic law, Islamic intellectual history, and Islam in America. Each are key topics on the minds of

students. Out of the eight *ALIM* teachers, he is the only one that any of the students identify as being part of their motivation for attending the programme.

In a 2014 interview, Jackson, a black American university academic and respected religious teacher, is reticent to discuss the story of his conversion. His hesitation is rooted in what he says are, “post-facto rationalisations of a series of engagements, events, epiphanies, that are not sort of rationally stacked in a manner that they would logically lead to a particular conclusion.” He is careful of retelling the past based on his current position in the present. His journey to Islam was informed by a conflux of circumstances and events taking place in the ghettos of Philadelphia in the 1970s. Yet, he vividly recalls an event that, in his words, was a “tipping point” for his conversion. One day, in his early twenties, he stood with friends on the corner of a street in his home city. Jackson observed one of the guys in the group that stood out a bit.

He was older than me. He was, as we would put it back in the day, he was showing up gangsta. We were standing there shooting the crap. You know these kinds of conversations that just sort of roam aimlessly. I noticed one thing about him was that he wasn't using any profanity. And this was completely out of place for that kind of setting and for somebody of his profile. So, I'm standing there, okay, this is interesting. Then I notice somebody would pass him the wine bottle. And he would say, 'No thanks.' Nothing judgmental, no attitude, just a very confident, 'No thanks.' Somebody would pass him a joint, 'No thanks.' And I'm looking at this guy because I knew him. And I knew who he was. He had been in and out of prison, a couple of times. And... I'm saying, 'what is going on with him?' He had clearly found a way of expressing his own sort of religious moral and spiritual commitments and in a context where they would have seemed out of place but he had found the packaging within which that could be affected. And I was very moved by that. So, I remember after we began to sort of disperse, I remember sort of edging over to him and asking him basically, 'what's up?!' And he told me that, 'Well I'm an orthodox Muslim.' And at that time the distinction, 'orthodox' meant you were not with Nation [of Islam]. I said, 'oh yea.' And so, he was working at a barber shop at that time. I walked him back to the barber shop and was talking to him about it. He went in to the barber shop and gave me a booklet. Towards Understanding Islam by [Sayyid Abul Ala] Maududi... I remember taking that book home and reading it. And that was really the beginning of a real transformation for me, personally. But it was more of a matter of

finding the packaging, the cultural personal sort of expression of religiosity in which I could feel that I could stay within my own skin... I had always believed in God, that wasn't the problem for me. The problem was how does one live a life of religious commitment and at the same time not lose the ability to sustain one's profile as oneself? You know, not to become a weirdo. Some kind of outcast or something like that. So that was the beginning of the move towards Islam for me...Once I came into the Muslim community, I very quickly became aware of the need to deepen this understanding and to learn it for myself" (Ahmed & Hassan, 2015).

This experience provides a context through which we understand how Jackson assesses the situation of American Muslims and, as a result, develops his educational philosophy. "*Islam is knowing what and when* compromise is permissible or not," he tells students. "Islam is fundamentally about living fully and righteously. It's about how that balance is struck. Anyone who looks at the *sīra* (biography) of Prophet Muhammad. He went to the cave of Hira and then went back." However, Jackson identifies a problem, "We take all of the burden from the people and give them the idea that they can live vicariously through the scholar. The only person that can really do this is you. And I want to try and empower you to do it." To achieve this objective, Jackson uses the *sīra* to set the foundation for understanding the message of the Qur'ān in its revelatory context. In referring to the life of the Prophet for moral guidance, Jackson's focus is on establishing a sense of belonging or mooring in America.

Standing before the students in dark trousers and a blue dress shirt, with a pair of eye-glasses hanging on a string around his neck, Jackson begins his session without soliciting any personal background of the students, though he does in a subsequent session. He begins with the Prophet's life. "If we want to understand the Prophet's method of proceeding, we need to go back to seventh century Arabia and look forward, rather than standing in the present and looking back," he says. Jackson recognises the prophetic model as the exemplar for determining one's modern practice. Yet, his approach veers away from glorifying an esteemed past. He cautions students

against this, noting that current rhetoric is problematic. “We turn Islam into a utopia and this prevents us from living,” he warns. Turning around, he picks up the chalk and draws a backwards facing arrow in the middle of the blackboard. “We have to start here,” he emphasises, pointing to the end of the arrow marked ‘seventh century’. “We have to go back to seventh century Arabia and instead of being here, in 2013 and looking back -- we want to go back to seventh century Arabia and look forward,” he says. Through different illustrations, Jackson tries to reshape the students’ mindsets to see Islam as an unfolding process, rather than an event from one period. He provides an analogy using a piece of his own history,

I'm reminded of when I was a child in my neighbourhood. Some of the older women would have these large 5,000-piece puzzles. You know, jigsaw puzzles – some of the grandmas. Now, what's the most important piece, when you go and buy a puzzle, what's the most important piece (S. Jackson, lecture, 17 June 2013)?

Different answers are heard from the group. “Side pieces, corner pieces, the border, the corner – the top”. Jackson stops and points to one of the young men. “That's the right answer...what did he say?”

...the box top. Now I'm not making a joke here. This is very serious. The box-top in a sense is the key to your ability to effectively construct the puzzle. Because the box-top gives you a sense of where all of those disparate pieces are actually supposed to go. Does everyone follow what I mean by that? Without that broader picture, you can spend a lot a lot a lot more time, trying to figure out where those pieces go. The box-top gives you a sense. If the box-top is a picture of an ocean, alright, with ships on it or something like that, okay, then you have a blue piece, it's likely to go at what part of the puzzle... probably near the bottom. If the box top is a nice big blue sky and there are mountains in the top, and you have a blue piece, where is it likely to go? The top... so the box top is what empowers you to place each piece in its proper place of significance. In a similar fashion, the *sīra* of Muhammad *ṣalla Allāh 'alayhi wa-sallam* empowers us to much better understand the many details of his Sunnah. Because it provides us with that broader picture. His manner of proceeding. What he was trying to achieve.

If I were to stand up right now in front of you and, just from my memory, recite 50 hadith, what would you say? *Māshā' Allāh. Alḥamdulillāh*. Shaykh! Right? And yet I may have zero understanding of how to prioritise these hadith or place them in the service of

an actual God-pleasing life living in a particular time in any particular space. Does everyone understand what I mean by that? I've just accumulated a number of what are potentially random facts. And without a broader context – a picture within which to place them, I might take sky pieces and put them where (S. Jackson, lecture, 17 June 2013)?

“The ocean,” one of the students call out. “And I might take ocean pieces and put them where?”

Jackson asks. “The sky,” another student calls out, understanding Jackson’s analogy. Whilst the example is apt, Jackson’s movement to seventh century Arabia doesn’t immediately account for his own modern-day lens that colours his view of that time.

“This is part of the importance of the *sīra* of Muhammad *ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam*. And so, we can think of the *sīra* as the macro and the Sunnah as the micro. Now again, I don't want to draw too sharp a distinction between those two genres, okay? Because in reality, it is as I said, that the distinction between *sīra* and Sunnah is something of a later development. In the early period, the two terms were used synonymously. The second major issue that I hope you will benefit from with regard to our discussion of the *sīra* is that will enhance your understanding of the Qur’ān. In fact, that is the uppermost aim. The uppermost goal, aspiration, of this discussion of the *sīra*. The basic point that I'm trying to make here is that the *sīra* establishes Islam in a sense, as a storied enterprise. What do I mean by a storied enterprise? Hmm. A community carries the meaning of Islam. A community carries the meaning of Islam. And most people throughout history have subscribed to this notion. And some have emphasised it more than others but it’s primarily modernity that introduces the new possibly. Primarily that Islam can be constructed by going directly and solely to scripture itself. This is scaring people, right? Hmm? Yea it is” (S. Jackson, lecture, 17 June 2013).

He attempts to address the role of time by staving off what he considers a ‘tempocentric approach’ which is to “view the world from the perspective of your own time.” He pauses, looking at the students. “Do you understand what I mean by that?” he asks. A phrase used so much that outside of the lessons that students say something to one another and then jokingly query the listener, “Do you understand what I mean by that?” bursting into laughter. Jackson likens the situation of American Muslims to that of the time of the Prophet in Makkah. However, in doing so, he brings to the fore tensions between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims. “Banu Hashim held social and cultural capital in Makkah, similar to the African

American community in the United States,” he says. Here, Jackson attempts to demonstrate that the Prophet didn’t marginalise influential Arab tribes but sought to include them in the development of a Muslim community. Jackson directs students towards an acceptance that they are woven into the American fabric. This is vital to Jackson’s educational project because “You can’t guide a people you don’t love. They will know. It’s instinctual,” he says.

Like Mattson’s, Jackson’s lectures are sprinkled with Arabic terminology. He encourages students to read the Qur’ān in English. For him, the language is necessary for the laity insofar as one needs to do one’s rituals. However, he acknowledges that understanding the language does give someone a bit more autonomy than one who does not. In his sessions he continues, highlighting historical developments of American Muslim communities and tensions between early immigrant communities and members of the Nation of Islam, who were seen by Muslims coming from Muslim-majority countries as residing outside the pale of the theological limits of Islam. “When immigrants came, they threw the baby out with the bathwater,” he says, causing rifts in the current communities to which some students belong. Jackson asserts that the cultural capital of NOI should have been harnessed instead of marginalised. His opinions aren’t popular. “My father wouldn’t like what he’s saying,” Noor says, looking a bit despondent. Yet, she says, “I wish he would just say what he wants to say. I feel like he’s tip-toeing around the issue.” Medina doesn’t look happy and Hina, one of her classmates, tells me why when I ask what has upset her.

Medina was saying that she doesn't like all of this immigrant bashing. We were saying that if it was a desi uncle up there saying the same thing we would not have an issue with it. Maybe what he is saying about not being one of the people in America is the same thing we are seeing in the class. That we can't really accept what he is saying because we don't see him as one of us.

Hina articulates her understanding of Jackson's point that members of immigrant communities often fail to recognise indigenous expressions of Islam or see them as legitimate.

When Jackson returns to conversation of Arabia he's on safer ground.

"The Prophet didn't isolate himself in Madinah, but he was aware of the dangers of assimilation. Assimilation entails the recognition of the cultural authority of the dominant culture. Judgements of the dominant culture can outweigh your own culture. It's not just what you are doing, but why" (S. Jackson, lecture, 17 June 2013).

However, Jackson posits that Muslims can't identify or recognise the cultural authority of dominant culture. He goes on to posit that the Prophet appropriated things from other cultures which he felt were appropriate to the Muslim's situation – fasting on the days the Jews did because Muslims were closer to Prophet Moses, as an example. Similarly, he gives the example of NOI adopting the use of suits and bow-ties as the dress for its members: a dress associated with a refined white man. Furthermore, Jackson uses the example of the first hajj the Prophet made after achieving victory over the polytheists in Makkah, who were fighting to stop the spread of Islam. "The Prophet wanted to make Islam indigenous in making the hajj. He wanted to show them that they would remain Arab and still be Muslim," he says. As opposed to what he sees as contentious in the present day, "Muslims don't have any relationships with non-Muslims. The Prophet could rely on his clan," he says. The examples he provides, coupled with his interpretation of them for present-day guidance, demonstrate how he hopes students make sense of their own everyday activities, much like Jackson's own religious quest. During his search for some sort of grounding that was God-centric, Jackson remarks that he was seeking, "outlets for expressing [religion] in a manner that seemed to be consistent with the sort of the individual and cultural profile that was me" (Ahmed & Hassan 2015).

When Jackson completes his analysis of the *sīra*, students are speechless. His initial promise that students would have a deeper understanding of what it meant for the Prophet to receive blessings of God when his name is invoked, was indeed felt. I watch some of the young men wipe tears from their faces and hear sniffles from both the men and women. As class disperses, students moved unhurriedly to collect their belongings. No one speaks as they exit.

Jackson guides students to consider the circumstances of the Prophet in relation to their own lives. His assessment is that Muslim youths are plagued by social issues, not theological ones. *“Modernity has presented Islam with a sense that has made us feel like we can’t take from the West,”* he says. He aims to ensure students don’t get caught up in the technicalities of religious practice to the point where they bypass the essence of living as Muslims.

We think that religiosity is moral or juristic success. Religiosity is moral and juristic struggle. It's not a matter of whether we hit the mark all the time. I can be a good Muslim with a drinking problem, depending on how gallantly I struggle with it. I can be a scoundrel without a drinking problem. This is all about ‘how do I struggle?’ How do I struggle to come up with an understanding of what God wants that I believe that I can actually face God with?

Our hope here is that all of you guys will leave here, not as shuyukh, but comfortable in your own skin as Muslims, much more empowered to go out there and consume intelligently, critically, what you hear from non-Muslims and what you hear from Muslims. That you can go in a masjid now and listen to a Friday khutbah and take from it what is beneficial. When the imam makes some statement of fact that you know is nonsensical, you can just dismiss it. He's wrong. Next. Our aim is to promote Islamic literacy and literacy for the purpose of empowerment. Because only empowered Muslims will be able to take us into the future (S. Jackson, lecture, 21 June 2013).

With such comments, Jackson makes room for a myriad of faithful expressions with an eye towards constructing a religious practice that one feels is acceptable to God. It’s clear that there are still long-established legal maxims that he upholds, given his example of alcohol consumption. One could be comfortable drinking and praying and feel comfortable with facing

God. This shows that there is an existing sphere of maxims that are fixed and it is only what falls outside of this sphere to which intelligent consumption and criticality can be applied.

[Back to the Everyday](#)

When the last days of the programme arrive, students are still coming to terms with the material covered and preparing to say their farewells. There was an appreciation for the structure of the programme that provided “facts in the beginning,” “a little bit of everything,” and “brought people’s life force into the discussion.” Students tell me they enjoyed being in an environment where “no question was off limits,” and they were given “the latitude to criticise.” As a result, they say they enjoyed “being challenged,” and having opportunities for “thinking [things] through,” enabling them to develop “new frameworks.”

On the last day, students take turns reflecting on their time in the programme. Some of their comments relate to the lectures -- how their experiences opened a way for them to think about Islam intellectually, spiritually, but also in the context of their everyday engagement with Muslims and non-Muslims. Others communicate their gratitude, “We’re never going to get this time again”, and “We are blessed to be in this environment.” There are few comments about specific topics that were impactful. Instead, students signal an attention to their own intellectual positioning. As one student remarks, “There was a balance between the dhikr (remembrance) and the fikr (intellect),” and “It made me realise that I have to pray. I can’t purely use my intellect to understand.” Other comments revolve around personal relationships they developed. “I have a network of people now, not for the material, but the spiritual,” one of the men remarks. “We are a community and a family,” a woman comments, before her spoken word performance. Another young woman gets up after her and dissolves into tears when talking about the bond of

sisterhood and how impressed she was with the way the young men interacted with them. “I learned ideal characteristics from each of the brothers,” another young man, soon to enter his first year of university, states. “[And] I was impressed by their level of confidence and how serious they are about their religion.” One young woman sums it up by saying, “People are so sincere here. Everyone is just trying to get right with God. You inspire me.”

The students set off the following day. Some young men slap hands and hug the programme’s director as he disembarks from the car to board his airplane. At the bus depot, one of the young men drops his backpack on the pavement, as he opens his arms to hug the other two young men. They tightly embrace one another, lingering in each other’s arms. Other students with their own cars walk to the parking lot, the remaining students trailing behind to say goodbye. “I don’t like tears,” one of the young women says, as she’s assisted in loading her bags. She gets hugs from the other women and waves from the young men.

Making their way back to the campus, the remaining students help pack things away in the van of one of the staff members to return to his home garage. Somehow it comes up that Aaron can breakdance. Medina pulls out her iPhone and fast hip-hop beats fill the room. Aaron hikes up his lunghi and busts out in a short break-dance performance. We applaud loudly when he’s done, laughing our way out of the room, making sure we escape being caught fraternising once again. Lights out, the room is bare, except for chairs and tables pushed against a wall. It is just another university classroom, sitting quiet during the slow summer months. Into the future students go, to imbue their own spaces with new meaning.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how teachers foreground the construction of an understanding of how tradition develops rather than a specific focus on content of subjects related to revealed sciences. They provide students with sequential knowledge, beginning with an overview of subjects related to the revealed Islamic sciences, then sketch the development of Islamic intellectualism. Teachers attempt to balance didactic methods with dialogical ones, sometimes using classical religious texts, general lecturing, or prompting students to ask and answer questions. Teachers also share bits of their personal histories, engendering a level of intimacy to facilitate discussion. Religious and non-religious community structures they have visited act as sites of memory, demonstrating how place is used to supplement classroom learning by positioning students within the history of their own socio-political context. These community institutions also act as sources from which teachers can implicitly draw to further assert their interpretative opinions that serve as the basis for their reformulation of tradition. Teacher and students are in conversation about how one can live faithfully within their current sociocultural context while continuing the discursive religious project.

The biographies presented in the chapter support the findings of the previous chapters by demonstrating the vital role Arabic language, knowledge of revealed sciences, culturally relevant knowledge, and an alchemist-like skill in drawing them all together to produce guidelines for being in the world religiously and ethically, act as components of religious authority. Moreover, we see how Arabic remains an important element of authority development, even when not used as a performative component in a teacher's pedagogical

approach. Furthermore, academic qualifications from secular institutions work to buttress authority obtained in classical pedagogical learning environments.

CHAPTER 7: LIVING THE 'DREAM'

Khaddijah: A Portrait

Nestled in the suburbs of an affluent Dallas neighbourhood, Nouman Ali Khan and his wife welcome the incoming students to the intensive nine-month Arabic programme, now in its fourth year. The gathering is only for women: a meet and greet for students and any accompanying family members. The two young women sit close together on a sofa in their teacher's living room, along with other young women from different parts of the country. Their dark skin sets them apart from most of the others, who are either Arab or South Asian. I observe them, wondering if I should greet them. There is a distinct glare in the eyes of one of them, eyes not hidden behind glasses like her companion. She looks hardened. It is as though she is warning me off. I wonder if I'm imagining things. Message received. I do not approach. However, after the late afternoon prayers are performed by the women, I approach the pair as they prepare to return to the sofa. I give the greetings of peace to them both but direct my talk to the bespectacled one. Fatima, she says her name is, and the woman still glaring at me next to her is her cousin, Khaddijah.

Months later, Khaddijah and I sit down together at a square wooden table across from one another, with no sense of discomfort in what we perceive as our space. Our faces are familiar to the baristas and a few of the regular Starbucks patrons that afternoon. Just off the 183 U.S. Texas highway, it was a pit stop for many truck drivers, a quiet enough place for Bible meetings, a resting place for older patrons to read, and a study area for local small groups of college students prepping for an exam. Indeed, it was here that my relationship with Khaddijah slowly developed. We had come a long way from that first encounter. Months prior, Khaddijah had confessed that she was initially put off by me. "Who is this girl just coming up and talking to me. I don't want to talk to anyone. I'm not here to make friends," she says. Ah, I think to myself. I hadn't imagined it. As we sip our specialty coffee drinks, I say to Khaddijah, "Speak on it." Knowing full well we were sitting down for a formal interview, Khaddijah laughs. "What? Okay, so I'll just talk," she said. She starts the tale of a seven-year-old girl on a journey to ensure the heavenly success of her family.

Khaddijah was born in New York to immigrant parents from Gambia. Religion was a small element of her early life. “We would pray and fast and that was about it,” she says. Her family had always lived in an area with other West Africans. “[Imams] would always tell them what to do. And once [the family] moved to a place where they didn’t know anyone and they actually had to go out there and go to the masjid... then they actually started researching stuff that comes from Islam and not just because the Imam says so,” she explains. Her mother began to seek knowledge at mosque events and local Muslim organisations in Atlanta. This slow journey towards a different level of religious practice was an impetus for Khaddijah’s mother to want her daughter to memorise the Qur’ān. She took to heart a widely circulated hadith, “A person who memorised the Qur’ān, adhered to that which is permissible, and refrained from that which is forbidden, Allah will admit him to Paradise and allow him to intercede for ten people of his family, all of whom deserved the fire.”²³ She used this narration to encourage Khaddijah to go to Senegal to memorise. “If you go then your whole family will go to *jannah*... if you memorise the whole Qur’ān, you can go to *jannah* and you can take your whole family to *jannah*.” Khaddijah recalls her mother saying. She also remembers her reaction, “I was like, oh my God. I’m gonna save the family, I’m gonna save the world.” But she is flippant in her recollection of her thoughts at that time, “...whatever!” she says to her younger self. “It was a hard transformation,” she says understatedly. It was so very like her. Very much an understatement, yet indicative of who she had become now at the age of twenty, expressing the need to exude strength and eschew any sense of vulnerability.

However, at seven years old she hadn’t developed these strategies. “I can’t do this by myself. I’m too young. I need you to come with me,” she recalls pleading to her pregnant mother at the airport before she was to board the plane alone for a nine-hour flight from Atlanta to Dakar. Her mother’s response, Khaddijah said, brought her some comfort, “OK. Me and you are going to do this together. As soon as I have the baby I’m going to come and stay with you until you finish.” Hours later at the Dakar Yoff International airport, Khaddijah was confronted with unfamiliar family friends. Her weak Wolof language skills only allowed basic communication. She says they told the strangers her mother’s name but she was still apprehensive about going with

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them. She thought to inquire about her father's name and, when she did, they told her his name, adding a few details about her family, which settled her uneasiness. So, she went along with them.

When she arrived at the boarding school, the teachers asked her what she knew, hoping to determine where her studies should begin. Unable to understand the French inflection in their speech, Khaddijah remained silent. As a result, one of the teachers beat her. Khaddijah remembers that they had fashioned a 'switch' from the rubber of a car tyre. The ridges embedded within it for traction were still in place. "He kept beating me until I would say something... I just kept quiet and cried," she says. Her days took on a sombre tenor. Housed in an unfinished warehouse building with three floors, she woke up from her bed and her lessons began.

Khaddijah narrates her daily routine. After the dawn prayer, students read until noon, at which point they were offered breakfast. The catch, however, was that if you hadn't memorised anything, you didn't eat. "But the food was horrible... they would leave the bread out till it's so hard... like we were breaking it with our heads. That's how hard it was. You'd be lucky if you had some tea and just put it in there and eat it," Khaddijah says. Lunch wasn't much different. Thirty students to one bowl. One scoop with your hand and that was it. As a result, her motivation to memorise was linked to ensuring she had a meal. However, she didn't memorise. "I was waiting for my mom, then I'll memorise," she says referencing her mother's airport promise. She procrastinated and subsequently, she was repeatedly beaten. It didn't faze her much, she says, "I was immune to people hitting me." However, her waiting was in vain. Two years went by before she would again see her mother. The sense of abandonment was exacerbated by the taunts of the other students. "*Talibe*", they called her, referring to students whose families had left them in the school and never returned. The choice of school by her mother was based on its proximity to her extended family, thirty minutes away. However, Khaddijah says she never saw them during the school's monthly family visits. She had no visits and no care packages, such as other students received. In her mind, she was indeed a *talibe*.

Khaddijah made friends with another *talibe*, Aida. They became thick as thieves, plotting to break out of the school and motivating each other to memorise. Aida's mother had dropped

her off and had yet to return. Khaddijah thinks Aida must have resided in the school for ten years before she arrived, though she swore they were the same age. The lack of proper nourishment probably contributed to this misconception. Aida often snuck out of school at night and made friends with some Christian youths who lived at a military base nearby. As a result, she talked to Khaddijah about God and Christianity. Aida explained that the people beyond the walls of the Qur'ān school had food to eat and lived happy lives, Khaddijah says. It's unclear if the two friends considered abandoning their own faith. Some of the people Aida met were American. Aida reminded Khaddijah she was also American. Surely, she had to have money or at least her family should. It was something that never occurred to Khaddijah. With the thought now at the forefront of her mind, on one of her calls to her mother, Khaddijah expressed that she had had enough and wanted to return home. Aida was now also a part of the deal. She would bring Aida over with her for a better life. Her mother informed her that she would only leave once she completed her memorisation.

Things became more serious at that point. Having previously given up hope, Khaddijah now threw herself into memorising. She memorised two pages a day, then four, increasing every day. "I finally had a purpose, I just needed to get out," she states. Though things seemed to be looking up, they took a turn for the worse when Khaddijah's little brother Omar arrived at the school to begin his studies. Unaware of what was going on at the school, due to Khaddijah's silence, their mother felt he would benefit as well. The bond between Aida and Khaddijah became strained as Khaddijah took on the role of protecting her brother. She didn't intend for him to suffer as she had and therefore, during meals, ensured he ate his handful and hers. She often went to sleep hungry – if it was even safe to fall asleep.

Khaddijah recalls that Aida became enraged by the protective bond between Khaddijah and her brother, growing jealous at the attention Omar received from her friend. "She would try to beat him up. She would try to kill him. She was jealous. When he's sleeping she would get a scarf and tie it around his neck... we had to sleep together and we would be crying the whole night." Sobbing and swiping at the tears falling on her face, she tells me the story. "They had knives in the kitchen. I would hide them in my clothes. Then they used to beat me because they thought I was a thief." In an attempt to protect her little brother, Khaddijah had hidden a knife

under her pillow when they turned in for the day. She also prayed for help. “The prayer was so long,” she says. “This Qur’ān, the owner of this Qur’ān, this thing that’s supposed to take me to heaven... I’m like look, whoever owns this book, whoever is taking this to heaven, who created us, please help me. Please help my situation. Please help me and my brother.” Nevertheless, she continued to memorise so that she would be able to leave. Nine months later, Khaddijah finished and went home. She was in a panic about what would happen to her brother. It was this feeling of dread that prompted her to divulge to her mother everything that occurred at the school. Her brother returned home soon thereafter. They never spoke about his time during those last few months without her.

Upon returning home, Khaddijah was filled with anger and rage. “I was bad,” she says. Her household chores remained incomplete. She talked back to her mother. She lied about performing her prayers. Though her mother’s practice continued to strengthen and her attendance at mosque programmes remained strong, Khaddijah had lost all interest in conversing with God. The blood, sweat, and tears she shed to save herself and her family had damaged her. Consequently, prayer and the Qur’ān held no interest. “What was the purpose of me praying? I didn’t care,” she recollects. “I [had] prayed to God for four years of my life every single day. I didn’t know who God was.” It was all for naught. She later gained some “so-called friends” from the local mosque, but they made her feel ashamed about her *hāfidha* status. “They would say ‘Oh you memorised the Qur’ān. Oh man, I feel so bad for you. I’m glad I only memorised one *juz’* so when I die I can only recite that and I can go to jannah. But now since you have all of that...’ I just didn’t want anyone to know,” she says. The children seemed to draw upon and conflate concepts that ran through the community, how memorising the Qur’ān and then forgetting it would displease God. The Qur’ān being for you (reward for its memorisation) or against you (memorisation without implementation). Khaddijah hid her accomplishment from people.

At the age of twelve, Khaddijah attended Islamic school at the local mosque. She remained there for only a short time before her mother pulled her out to be home-schooled. This enabled her mother to attend nursing school while Khaddijah watched the children at home. Once again, the sense of abandonment set in. She doesn’t talk much about her father. To

Khaddijah, his role in the family was to provide for them financially. He was out working and providing and she didn't brook any argument with his presence or lack thereof in her previous ordeal. The bad elements of the past four years of her life loomed large and her mother was at its centre.

Now made to care for her younger siblings, Khaddijah took her anger out on them. She beat them when they acted up and pushed away any tenderness. Even Omar, over whom she once laid to protect him from harm, wasn't safe from her. Omar tried to rekindle that feeling between them but his efforts had no effect. "He [was] so affectionate now, but I'm like no. I just pushed him away. I don't want to get sad. I would remember the time we would hug each other until we fell asleep. And every time he hugs me it just reminds me of that," she says with a bit of embarrassment. It took her grandmother intervening, advising her of the consequences if she harmed the children to the point of death. Khaddijah stopped.

Soon after, she made a categorical decision in relation to her mother: "I'm not doing this with your kids no more," she told her mother. "There had to be more than just staying at home watching TV and looking after her brothers and sisters," she recalls thinking to herself. She began to attend a home-schooling programme run by a woman who lived in the West End with six other children. The woman modelled a public-school setting and they carried out science experiments, took group trips, did homework, and projects. Going to school was her only time out of the house, apart from events put on by the mosque or another organisation. Though she had no interest in the topics, she would go to these events. "It was the only way I was going to get out of the house," she says. It was at one of these events that she encountered Nouman Ali Khan. His influence, knowledge of the Arabic language and teaching style would mitigate the negativity and disassociation she felt towards the Qur'ān and Islam.

"I went to a 10-day class twice," Khaddijah says, referring to one of the traveling education programmes offered by Bayyinah Institute. "It gave me a broader look on Islam. He would actually use Qur'ān words," she notes in ignorant familiarity. "That's something I'm familiar with. He's talking my language," she says. "I was like, oh my God, this is so much more interesting than just reading the Qur'ān and the translation or trying to find myself or be heavenly," she slightly jests. It opened her up to a new world.

They're saying Islam is the way of life, why can't I not look in the Qur'ān and look at it in a way that is in OUR time. I feel like he [Nouman Ali Khan] had a connection with the youth and he can read the translation, but the way he would word it and explain it to us was in a way that WE could understand. Not people from the 1980s and 1970s. I just felt like this dude can relate to us. He's just like a big brother.

Khaddijah decided she would attend the *Dream* programme sometime soon. She saw value in being able to read the Qur'ān and she gave that to the little girls she taught at Sunday school. "I didn't feel I had much to offer, but they can read the Qur'ān. That's all I can offer," she says. Khaddijah was also on a journey, not seeing much difference between herself and her students. "I'm still trying to figure things out myself... I wanted my Islam to change... I was never concerned about the world so much because I feel like I have my own issues," she states. Indeed, she did. She married at nineteen and divorced a year later, experiencing a miscarriage at the hands of a physically abusive husband.

Back home with her mother, she continued classes at the local community college and took on a job. The autumn season drew closer, as did the beginning of the fourth year of the *Dream* programme. Khaddijah's mother wanted to do something to help her daughter deal with the hurt she was experiencing and get away from the painful memories of her recent divorce. Knowing Khan was the only Muslim preacher whom Khaddijah respected, Khaddijah's mother suggested she attend *Dream*. Khaddijah was hesitant, not because she was uninterested, quite the contrary. "I always wanted to do Bayyinah. I [had] saved up two thousand dollars already," she states. "I was working. I wanted to be independent. I don't want her to tell me what to do," she says, referring to her mother. Her grandmother once again intervened, calling from Gambia crying on the phone, pleading with Khaddijah to do this for her mother. "Everything I do is for this woman!" she recalls thinking. Nonetheless, she acquiesced. After all, she says, "I'm doing this for her but we have somewhat of the same interests." Khaddijah applied and was accepted one week before the programme start date.

As we talk, now at the end of the nine months, her completion of the programme seems to leave her completely fulfilled.

I got more than what I asked for. The fact that I can open the Qur'ān and look at it and understand based on context and read the tafsīr and understand it... The fact that I can connect to the Qur'ān. The fact that I can pray, I can read a sūra and not remember, oh

this is the sūra where you got choked or this is the where he pinched you until you were bleeding. I can pray and... I'm focused. I wanted to get close to the Qur'ān. I was ready to be a better person. I wasn't trying to be a better Muslim. I was trying to be a better human being in general. Everyone talks about how they want to be good Muslims. Like they want to be the best Muslims. And I'm like what about being a good human being first because you are human before you're Muslim.

.....

Khaddijah's harrowing experience in Senegal that ends in peaceful redemption in Texas is an example of the importance placed on Qur'ānic memorisation and demonstrates the stress placed on understanding Arabic. The Qur'ān is held to be a verified and verifiable book of truth, protected from tampering through time. This is an indisputable fact that is agreed upon by most Muslims, unlike some of the intellectual disputes that surround *hadith*. Memorisation of the Qur'ān is a common expectation many observant parents have of their young children. Parents teach their children small chapters of the Qur'ān themselves or turn over the responsibility to a teacher specialised in its rules of recitation. Many children have a select number of chapters memorised during early childhood, and a select few will have committed all one hundred and fourteen chapters to memory before puberty. However, the average memoriser lacks knowledge of the meaning.

Building on the findings of the previous chapters, this chapter shows how through dexterity with the language a religious teacher proves how knowledge of the language can enable an untrained person, without classical or secular qualifications, to understand the Qur'ān directly and read exegetical texts to develop an understanding of God's words based on a method of self-learning. This adds another layer of complexity to understanding the construction of authority, by demonstrating that autodidacticism, legitimised by the laity, is an acceptable mode of religious authority. This construction of authority, as exhibited by the teacher, relies on a sense of shared identity and experiences between the teacher and students – irrespective of gender. I show how the teacher reconfigures Islamic tradition around his personal history, cultural knowledge, and superior skill in wielding knowledge of the Arabic language, solidifying his authority at multiple levels and dimensions.

Eager to Dream

It's close to seven in the morning and the car park outside the building which houses the Bayyinah offices is bereft of cars. The commercial building's black glass windows reflect the image of the clouds and the blue sky above. An American flag flaps violently on the pole standing at the entrance of the lot, intermittently slapping against the Texas state flag below it. A circular fountain sits at the front of the building, creating a roundabout for the cars to come through. The building lies within a burgeoning Muslim community, primarily with families of South Asian ancestry. Day by day, builders construct wide houses that sit across the highway bridge behind the commercial building. A mosque is nestled behind the housing complex facing the main road. It is also undergoing its own reconstruction, as a new annexe will include a gymnasium. Adjacent to it is an apartment complex where many students have rented apartments for the duration of the programme.

Sitting outside in my car, I watch as a group of young women approach the front of the building, quite eager to begin the first day. Class is scheduled to start at eight. However, fearful of their classmates arriving before them and getting the good seats -- the front row of the classroom -- they stand and wait for someone to open the building. I exit my car and approach them as someone arrives with the key. We ride up the lift to the fifth floor and when they are permitted entry through the double glass doors with the word 'bayyinah' in embossed in burgundy Arabic script across it, they dash through the women's lounge, and into the main classroom. The colours of the room are a mix of burgundy, black and white -- the official colours of the institute. A mobile solid black barrier divides the classroom in two, with the young men and women on opposite sides. A small space is left at the back between the wall and end of the

barrier. Five rows of folding tables are arranged on each side with burgundy pieces of fabric affixed to them. The men and the women each have an unobstructed view of the large white constructed dais that sits across the front of the room. Shelves of books line the back. Arabic script stretches across the spines of the multiple volumes spelling out their titles. Large windows take up three quarters of the walls, their sills painted white and burgundy. They provide a view of the intersection of two of the city's main highways.

Having placed their belongings in the desired front row seats, the young women repose in the adjoining lounge until class begins. As the clock moves closer to eight the chatter in the classroom is at full throttle as the sixty-five chosen students from across the United States, Canada, and one from England, wait for the session to begin. For the next nine months, students will improve their skill with the Arabic language so that they are able to read and understand the Qur'ān on their own. The programme aims to provide Qur'ānic literacy, using classical and modern standard Arabic, equipping students with keys to access exegetical writings and develop their own understanding of the text. Additionally, students receive instruction in *hadith* literature from a popular textual primer, an introduction to Judaic studies, and are required to memorise *Sūra al-Kahf*, which consists of 110 verses. Nouman Ali Khan, the organisation's founder and the main teacher, makes his goal clear to students.

[The] goal of the programme is to leave you equipped to access sources--not all the sources, but certain good grammar linguistic sources, so by the time I'm done you can go to them yourself and access them. There are certain books I want you to benefit from. I'll start with those that will give you the ability to go on to another one. At least a tafsīr that can benefit any Muslim (N.A. Khan, lecture, 8 October 2013).

The forty-four students from different parts of the United States who participate in my research study are in their early years of adulthood and are primarily of South Asian descent. Ranging

from 18-21 years of age, the majority hold undergraduate degrees and are unmarried. They identify three primary reasons for attending the programme: to develop a relationship with the Qur'ān; a deeper understanding of the word of God for personal benefit; or to further their Islamic studies. The location of the programme also contributes to their reason for attending. American Muslim students interested in intensive Arabic language study have often travelled overseas to study in private Arabic centres, higher education institutions, or in the homes of teachers in cities such as Cairo and Damascus. "I wanted to go to Egypt but wasn't able to because my family wasn't comfortable with the political situation," one young woman states. Another student, native to Dallas, took a year out of medical school to attend. "I've always wanted to study Arabic, but I don't have time. Here, I can study Arabic and still deal with my obligations," he says. A location within a vibrant city offers a degree of comfort to parents who are often uncomfortable with their children living abroad. Although *Dream* is set in a city that lacks any visual or readily identifiable elements of a historic Muslim presence, such as those present in *Rihla* and *ALIM*, the programme is still perceived to offer an "Islamic" and "Western" setting that is safe from the violence of political instability.

It is intentional on Khan's part. "Why would I be on the fifth floor of a commercial building? Why not be adjacent to a masjid? Why not be out on a farm somewhere or some exotic location. I went to Baruch College, New York City. This is my way of remembering where I was," he lowers his head and chuckles a bit at his own response. "It worked. It was functional. It kept you serious. You were in a business atmosphere. And I also didn't want my students to forget where they are living. I don't believe in cutting yourself off from society," he affirms.

In 2006, Khan founded Bayyinah Institute, an educational organisation focused on the study of the Qur'ān. *Dream* is the institute's nine-month residential Qur'ānic Arabic programme, one of many of his educational projects. "The vast majority of what Bayyinah does is enrichment. Because I personally believe the umma is in need of enrichment. And if they are enriched enough they will themselves be motivated towards education," Khan explains. He expounds upon what he describes as his aim of inciting a feeling of curiosity within his audience. "You walk away excited about the Qur'ān. You want to learn more about it," he says. His Arabic language fluency, as well as the humour which he exhibits whilst lecturing, has prominently placed him as a person of knowledge in the minds of many Muslims. However, Khan fails to self-identify as a "scholar" and instead sees himself as an "education activist". He makes it clear that he sees a scholar as "someone who has spent a good amount of their life gaining expertise in a subject and they have some sort of mentorship in place that they did that with." He continues,

You have to have a mentor. You have to have someone guiding you in your studies. In our system, we have the *ijāza* system. It's pretty much the Ph.D. system. You have someone who is guiding you in your studies and making sure what you learned is correct and critiquing your thought process to refine it further... I had that temporarily, but a lot of my stuff is self-study and interactions partially with scholars. So, I'm educated in many things, but I don't think formally. So, the people of that formal education, they are in a different category (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Nonetheless, amongst his audience, both at home and abroad, Khan is taken to be a scholar of Islam given the topics and issues he addresses and his use of textual references to support his opinions. However, Khan doesn't take responsibility for this misunderstanding, and instead says it is the inability of lay Muslims to differentiate between the different levels of scholarship their religious teachers hold. He asserts that this weakness is part of what contributes to his

popularity. Given this deficiency, he accepts that it is his role to clearly delineate what he is and what he is not.

It's a matter of social responsibility that activists like myself go out of their way to let me know what they are and what we're not. It's a part of social responsibility. Because I think when we start saying we are all things Islam or we don't say, we are not all things Islam. (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Yet, Khan doesn't do much of this and his textual analysis and concluding opinions are communicated in the same fashion as those of trained scholars. Nonetheless, Khan's proficiency with the Arabic language and ability to excavate 'gems'²⁴ from the Qur'ān to provide life guidance garner him international acclaim. However, he is an unlikely candidate for the popularity he currently enjoys. His age, lack of formal religious training, or degree from a secular institution, set him apart from his peers teaching at the same level. It is often religious teachers older in age, more seasoned in their teaching and learning that have attained this level of fame. However, not yet forty, Khan is only rivalled by Hamza Yusuf in popularity, as indicated by my research participants across the study, though *Dream* students put him closer to Zaid Shakir in popularity.

Students who study with Khan identify his teaching style and personality as the hook which gets them to enjoy learning lessons from the Qur'ān. "*He has a really creative imagination,*" one young man remarks. One of his peers elaborates on what he means by this.

Sometimes I feel that I already know him because I used to watch 'Bayyinah TV'²⁵. So, I'm used to his voice and his jokes and things. I like when we go off on tangents. It makes it more real. You can see how you can implement what you're learning. I've read things many times and then when he explains the connection with the words then I say ooohhh! (Student, personal communication, 24 September 2014).

²⁴ Seemingly similar to *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān wa durāruḥ*, Jewels of the Qur'an and its Pearls by al-Ghazālī.

²⁵ Online video channel by Bayyinah Institute providing videos of Khan's lectures.

“I wish I could meet ustādh in high school,” one young man dreamily says. He seems to think that the personality he sees on YouTube or in the classroom is representative of who Khan has always been. However, this is far from the case.

When I sit down with Khan over a series of four interviews he tells much of his early life. He was born in Germany in 1978. His father was posted to Saudi Arabia in 1984 and they spent six months in Pakistan before relocating. For eight years in Riyadh, Khan attended a private international school for children of diplomats and expatriates during his eight years in Riyadh. The school followed the Pakistani curriculum, Urdu being its language of instruction. Despite living in an Arabic speaking country and attending a school with an Islamic Studies curriculum, Khan says he learned very little of religion. He recalls that students memorised short chapters of the Qur’ān and went over short explanations of these chapters. However, there wasn’t much variation over the years and each grade had minor alterations that gave the illusion of being something new. “[You] learn how to make wudu, clean yourself, that sort of thing. Qur’ān, you know very little. A couple of *sūras*,” he recalls. His supplementary encounters with religious knowledge were informal in nature. Attending prayers at the mosque every night with his father facilitated memorisation of verses of the Qur’ān which the imam repeated every night. He says that at some point, it dawned upon his parents that the school was remiss in providing substantial religious knowledge. At the age of eight, they decided to enrol Khan in a programme at the local mosque so he could learn to read the Qur’ān. At this point, like many other young boys his age in other countries, memorising in a beautiful voice was a top priority to participate in local recitation competitions. His walks to and from the mosque complicated his ability to learn, given that he says he was almost abducted twice. “Like a dude is following you, you run

into a store and wait until they're gone and then tell the store guy to call your parents. Like, it's pretty crazy. It wasn't an easy life," he describes. The family eventually moved to a different neighbourhood and a Qur'ān teacher taught him and his sister at home. At the end of fifth grade, Khan completed the recitation of the Qur'ān. His engagement with the language itself remained restricted to prayers in the mosque and memorisation, despite living in an Arab-speaking country. Khan's father, although observant in his own prayers, had never forced his children to pray. Khan says, "... except for the Qur'ān teacher that came in the home, other than that the home was more a place for ninja turtles and all that. Just a typical household."

Upon his completion of eighth grade, Khan says they moved back to Pakistan. He was placed in the tenth grade and encountered Pakistan's Islamic curriculum, which included a formal study of Arabic language. The curriculum focused heavily on grammar and memorisation of verb conjugations, something Khan had become quite adept at during his formative years. It also introduced him to stories of the Prophet and his companions, in addition to the heroes and martyrs of Pakistani history. The result of the hagiographic framing put India and, by extension, Hindus, on the wrong side of history. The narrative went further to draw on the life of Prophet Muhammad, placing Hindus and polytheists of seventh-century Makkah side by side as filthy people. This mental framing would come back to haunt Khan. He went on to complete the tenth grade in America when his father was posted to New York City, land of the polytheists, as his previous education had characterised. His time in New York would be the point at which he would question, lose, and then recover his faith.

Sitting on the dais in front of the students at the start of *Dream*, Khan begins his talk with a reminder. "Anything that allows us to learn the dīn and get closer to Allah is a gift from Allah,"

he says, going on to cite a hadith of Prophet Muhammad, “The best of you are those who learn the Qur’ān and teach it.” He implores the students devotedly staring back at him, that they have been given a rare opportunity. “Most of us are trying to get by... here the Prophet *ṣalla Allāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam* is giving you the opportunity to be best of Muslims... rise to the occasion,” he says. By making such a declaration, Khan aims to ensure students understand why they are here, as well as his expectations of them. “We are not just here to study a subject. This will get us closer to Allah,” he says to remind them of the higher goal. He continues, “I think this will be the best year of the programme. We’ve put in a lot of resources and time. This year will be unique. We are recording this year. It will be the standard... the archive of the Dream programme for years to come,” he states. I’m unable to determine if his singling out of this batch is something he says to each cohort to spur them on. However, it will stand out, as it will be the last year Khan acts as primary teacher of the programme.

His expectations of students are clear from the outset. “Outside of here you have to uphold certain values,” he informs them. It is one of the reasons for the barrier that divides the room. When I probe Khan about its presence days later he indicates that it is a means to guide student behaviour outside of the classroom.

I took a lot of consultation from a lot of scholars about whether there should be or shouldn’t be... when you come to something like segregation of the genders obviously, and you start saying the fiqh of the subject, you’re going to find an entire array of opinions. Which leads you to believe there is no hard and fast rule. There are some guidelines, but beyond those guidelines you have to make a judgement call. My thoughts on this space was, okay so I’m thinking teenagers are coming here. College students are coming here. Married people are coming here. And unmarried people are coming here. They are going to be spending hours and hours and hours in this room. If there is no divider, that’s just asking for trouble. Because the eye will wander. And if there is a divider they both feel safe. Nobody is being deprived of having access to the teacher [or] being able to ask questions. It’s a judgement call and I think it’s best for the students... by putting this in am I depriving my students of anything? I’m absolutely convinced the

answer to that is no. I'm not. Number two, is it helping them in any way? And I believe the answer is yes. It's good enough for me. If I thought that putting a partition in was going to somehow deprive either side of something I should have offered them, I wouldn't do it.

This is an Islamic programme... this is an Arabic programme but it's also an Islamic programme. And the one thing I want to instil in these guys, especially the guys, is the value of interacting with the opposite gender respectfully. You have to interact with the teaching assistants. You have to interact sometimes with the sister group on something or another, but lines need to be drawn. And I think that if they learn to draw those lines, and by the way, once they walk out of this building I don't control them... so nine months of that, I'm hoping when they go to real campus and there are no lines, they can draw the lines for themselves (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

The students don't get many opportunities to interact with one another and thus, they are unable to ascertain when or how these lines need to be drawn. Unsurprisingly, the students are of two minds about the presence or utility of the divider. Those who are content with it feel it removes the need to be self-conscious and allows them to act naturally. Whether men or women, they can come dressed as they choose or sit on their chairs in a way that they find comfortable but may appear as improper to the opposite gender. Students also claim that it helps them to focus on their work without concerning themselves with the gaze of the other gender. As a result, they say it instils camaraderie on both sides. These opinions stand in opposition to students who see the divider as both a problem and something foolish. It creates what they consider an unnatural environment that erases human nature and respect. "It enables shady things to happen," one student says. "[We] have to expect more from the youth and not treat them like they are animals," another student chimes in. In the end, they feel it leads to the erection of unnatural barriers outside of the classroom.

Khan continues in his introductory delivery, requesting that the students have patience with his methods. "I need you to trust me when I say that 'ABC' is better. Don't worry about the

rest. We are going to cover the matter this way. This is based on previous studies. We are going through the same journey and taking another road to get there,” he says. It seems to be unnecessary as most of the students are here because they already trust him, even though at times they contest his opinions or directives in a variety of ways. “He knows his stuff,” or “He knows what he is doing,” is what many students remark when I ask them why they chose him. Other responses veer more to the personal. “I know his story,” “I’ve seen his transformation,” “He’s studied many different methods of teaching Arabic,” and “The best teachers are the ones that learned it themselves so they know what you will go through,” are among their responses. One young man says, “He made my heart move. If he can move my heart like this, I want to know what makes him tick. Arabic sparked his transformation.”

Aware of his popularity, Khan attempts to dismiss the celebratory view students have of him at the start:

Most of you are familiar with me from YouTube. That Nouman Ali Khan doesn’t exist. Don’t call me shaykh. I’m not a shaykh. Don’t call me “brother.” Just ustādh (teacher). We need to break down barriers because I need to be in conversation with you. I want you to know I’m accessible. I will learn your names over the next 10 days (N.A. Khan, lecture, 15 September).

To manage expectations, he tells students, “I cram in a lot of jokes. I’ll make jokes about you.” Yet, he emphasises the need for there to be mutual respect. At the end of the introductory session, Khan gives students a 15-minute break. I circulate on the women’s side of the barrier; as I’ve yet to introduce myself to the students, making an impromptu visit to the men’s side would potentially create confusion and discomfort. The women chat with one another in the classroom and the lounge areas. Their excitement is revealed as some comment that they can’t believe their luck in sitting right in front of Khan. Others, who were absent from the welcome lunch

Khan's wife put on for the students in the days before, meet their classmates for the first time.

Despite the women outnumbering the men, over the months it is the young men who modulate the classroom tenor. After three years of offering the programme, Khan expects and laments this dynamic. "[The] first year I taught the *Dream* programme I had so much trouble from the guys, I was thinking of making *Dream* a women's only programme."

Arabic Learning

Students return to the classroom at the end of the break for an introduction to Khan's Arabic terminology, whereby he has devised his own English terminology to explain linguistic concepts. Weeks later he introduces students to the associated Arabic terminology that appears in classical and modern grammar books. More conventional approaches teach students the classical Arabic terminology alongside the grammatical constructions at the beginning. Khan's approach facilitates students learning in English to solidify their understanding in their own language. "At the end of the innovative approach, you have to come back to the tradition so that you are on the same page with everyone else because you'll be learning from other teachers. The only benefit to taking an innovative approach is to get you started," he clarifies for students. He gives students an Arabic phrase that serves as the expression of the day, something that will run for the full length of the programme. Students are required to memorise it and are tested in the morning. Its purpose is to help students understand Arab culture – how they think and speak, as well as the grammar and vocabulary of the phrase. Khan asks questions of the class and when students respond correctly he gives them praise. However, he reminds them, "I don't care about answers. I just care about how you get to the answers." He continues summarising concepts for students before moving on to the next one.

On the second day of class, in what becomes an intermittent pattern for the remaining months of the programme, a guest speaker is invited to address the students. Today's speaker is one of *Dream's* former co-teachers, now a director of his own 10-month intensive Islamic programme in Dallas. As someone who previously provided what was considered the *tarbiya* (character development) component of *Dream*, he advises students about what to reflect on during their time studying.

Your intention is the most important thing. There is a greater purpose. You are here to seek the pleasure of Allah. The purpose is not to know Arabic. If it is, it's very sad and short-sighted. Because of the level of the umma, a little bit is considered a lot. If you can't change your relationship with Allah, then you can't help anyone. All of this is a means to an end -- to get closer to Allah. If that is achieved, then congrats. There is a process and prioritisation when seeking knowledge. Without the Arabic language, there is no seeking knowledge. If you don't know Arabic, then you are not a serious *tālib-ul-'ilm*. This is what you have to dedicate yourself to.

There is a profound respect to respecting the means of seeking knowledge. Scholars wouldn't throw their pen on the table as a means of showing respect. You have some very tangible means of seeking knowledge. Respect, one, the place where you are seeking knowledge. Two, even the administrators. Respect their authority. The best thing that Allah can bless you with is a teacher. People are crying and begging to get someone you can learn from. Allah has provided you with someone you can learn from. Respect them. Knowledge will not be attained through videos. It is transferred from chests to chests, from hearts to hearts, that's how it has been for 1400 years and that's how it has continued to be. If someone completes this programme but still struggles with their Arabic, then that is a successful student. If someone leaves this programme speaking fluently but couldn't get the *tawfiq* (success) to pray on time, then you've failed. That's a harsh reality, but that's the case. I want you to really think on why you are here (A. Jangda, lecture, 15 September 2013).

The guest teacher gives many pieces of advice that make it difficult to ascertain his exact message. Many of the students are not here to continue on a path of religious scholarship, yet his words seem to be directed to only those who are. The idea that they will be able to improve their religious practice through their basic understanding of the language is a substantial assumption, especially given that they don't have a scholar to learn from, as articulated by Khan

himself. Furthermore, the teacher asserts that they will not obtain knowledge from videos, which is the main vehicle through which he and Khan have achieved popularity and continue to maintain it. Yet, the face to face encounter – attendance in their educational programmes – is privileged above all else.

After a few weeks, the programme takes on a regular rhythm. Students rise early and drive on deserted highways and empty roads. The sun bedazzles the tips of the autumn-filled trees. The orange and auburn leaves sparkle gold and ruby against the sky as the sun rises to sit in and view her dominion below. The car park is empty and the water fountain remains asleep. The more dedicated students arrive at 7am to attend an hour session to learn the rules of proper recitation of the Qur'ān. Around five to seven men and women show up on either side. Class begins an hour later, with the head teacher taking the place of Khan to introduce the phrase of the day on the large projector screens. The first row of the women's side is always attended and the majority of the women are in place, notebooks open and pens primed. Some two to three women come in late over the first 10 minutes. On the men's side, seats remain free in the front and many of them wander in late, often missing the phrase. Some are bold enough to ask the headteacher to put it back on the screen. He refuses and tells them to get it from someone else. Khan quietly enters at the back of the room some 10 to 15 minutes later, in an immaculate suit buttoned at the waist, white shirt, and coloured tie. He walks towards the women's side and remains at the end of the divider to converse with the lead teacher, a former student of the programme. She is responsible for monitoring the learning trajectory, and she apprises Khan of the topics and issues he should cover for the day, based on the curriculum as well as an evaluation of student homework. Discussion finished, he walks over to the windowsill, sits, and

watches the class until the memorisation and review of the phrase is complete, then makes his way to the front of the room to begin the lesson.

Khan uses a call and response method to teach the materials. Basic Arabic teaching is often mostly composed of grammar and morphology. Students must understand the grammatical concepts in English and Arabic to read higher level language texts. Morphology requires an understanding of the three/four letter root words in Arabic and the different pronouns, as well as vowel placements that are required to understand the gender and number of people or objects being referred to. Khan writes on the electronic tablet that projects everything on to the two screens. After explaining different constructions, he erases it and asks students to recall what he explained. True to his word, he has learned the names of the students by the end of the first week. He goes back and forth between the different sides, calling out the names of different students to answer questions. Hands shoot up to answer. Some of the young women clutch the sleeve cuffs of their long loose gowns to prevent their arms from showing in the air. Khan often bypasses raised hands but encourages students to continue to participate. “Raise your hand. Continue to do so even if I don't pick on you. Sometimes I know you know and I need to get some other people to answer the question,” he explains.

Khan sees classical Arabic as mathematical. He encourages students to “Learn its systems.” He acknowledges that even though no one speaks classical Arabic, the presence of the Qur’ān will not allow the language to die. Highlighting the nature of the Arabic of the Bedouins, he says:

There are Bedouins who are really classical in their Arabic – like in Mauritania. They memorise Qur’ān on plates that they carved it into. It’s a different life. It’s like traveling in time if you go out there. They go and milk the camel during the day and then the father

goes and tells the boy to draw the water from the well. Then they spend their evening reading and memorising Qur'ān (N.A. Khan, lecture, 30 September 2013).

“How do you get to Mauritania?” asks one of the young men given the idyllic picture of piety Khan has presented, echoing the comments of others we've heard in previous chapters of this thesis. Ignoring the comment, Khan continues, emphasising the complications of traveling overseas to study and reinforcing the value of *Dream*.

We make *dua'* (supplication) that things calm down. A lot of youth are telling me they want to go and study in Egypt or Morocco. I recommend that but not right now. When you get back here you won't get a warm welcome back at the airport. [The] stress it causes your parents...one day you don't call your mom and she's watching the news on Al Jazeera [and] there was an explosion. You call back and you're like, 'mom no big deal,' and it's no big deal but she almost died – at least your mother. Your dad he's already given up on you. You're studying Arabic, you're not going to amount to anything in life. That's why I think what we are doing here is so important. The ones who go abroad, I commend your courage and the courage of your parents. If you are going to go I would recommend Malaysia or Turkey (N.A. Khan, lecture, 30 September 2013).

He homes in on his choice of Malaysia, a country he has visited to explore the possibility of extending his education programming abroad.

I have a soft spot for Malaysia. I'm a bit infatuated with the place - the faculty, the culture, the papers I read there. Next time I go back and I'm just going to spend a month in the library. Muslim students from 110 countries and they all have to do at least two years of Arabic. So, everyone can speak Arabic on campus. How cool is that?! (N.A. Khan, lecture, 30 September 2013).

The rhetorical question shows Khan's preference for students to be able to communicate in Arabic. He uses Cambridge University Press's Elementary Modern Standard Arabic primer to facilitate this process. Published in 1983, the often archaic language amuses the students as they work in groups to do the learning exercises. It's important for Khan “...because the really cool scholars who write about classical [Arabic] write in modern Arabic,” he says. The text gives

students the vocabulary to speak in a modern context, in hopes of making Arabic natural to students.

It takes Arabic from being a science and starts making it something you can feel and you can express your emotions through. When you listen to the Qur'ān, after learning something you don't just see technical rules you start feeling the language, you develop an emotional bond and you are experiencing how Allah is saying it (N.A. Khan, lecture, 17 September 2013).

Once again, Khan relates it to his own life. "My first experience, I just wanted to understand what it said but when I started to taste the Qur'ān. When you become comfortable with the language, something happens, something juicy," he says with a lopsided smile. Khan's intimate encounter with the Qur'ān came at the hands of a student of the popular Islamic philosopher in Pakistan, Dr Israr Ahmed. Ahmed was trained in medicine and became interested in Islamic activism during his time as a medical student. He was an active member of the Islamic political organisation Jamati Islami. After obtaining his medical qualifications he went on to gain a postgraduate degree in Islamic Studies from Karachi University. Ahmed developed into a well-known figure, later abandoning the Jamati Islami in the mid-1970s and forming another Islamic organisation: Tanzeemi Islam. Lecturing in Urdu, often focusing on the Qur'ān, Khan valued Ahmed's contribution to the field of Islamic intellectualism.

Dr Israr dedicated his life to studying Qur'ān. This man studied Qur'ān for 40-45 years. I may not agree with all of his philosophical opinions, but I respect him for being one of the great minds of the last century. I mean, really ahead of his time. How do you manage someone sitting in Pakistan talking about an intellectual criticism from the Qur'ān's perspective on materialism, agnosticism...and he has all of these isms down like he's a philosophy professor but he's not, he's a medical doctor. He understood western philosophers. Like he could quote Kant like he could quote the Qur'ān (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 24 September 2013).

It was during the month of Ramadan when Khan, not yet twenty years of age, encountered Abdus Samie, a student of Ahmed, at a local mosque which catered to South Asian Muslims in

Queens, New York. In the month of fasting, it is common practice for mosques to hold short lecture sessions between every four sets of prayers, which are special to the holy month. During these breaks, Abdus Samie provided a brief explanation of the Qur'ān in Urdu. His style was the impetus for Khan's metamorphosis and would later provide him with his vocation.

...no one actually walked me through the entire Qur'ān. And this was the only speech where the speech itself was the Qur'ān. Like it wasn't a subject and you quote something from the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is the subject. I had never experienced that before. And when the Qur'ān is presented like that to you, your assumptions about what the Qur'ān contains changed. I think I did and most Muslims still have an oversimplified understanding of what the Qur'ān contains. Yea it talks about faith, it talks about halal and haram. It talks about old nations... eh... what else is there. But when you actually hear it out and it is talking about you and your life and how you're living and how you're spending your time... That is how he presented it. A living book! A living book! Allah is talking to you. I'm sitting there listening to him but when you listen after a couple of hours you lose consciousness that there's a speaker there. You just feel like Allah is communicating this message to you. Even though it was in Urdu, I was just absolutely blown away. That was probably the most epic life-changing experience I've had in my religious learning. It's that one month of Ramadan. And so, at the end of it, I was so inspired by what he did. I was like, this has never been done in English. Not like that. No one has ever introduced the world to the Qur'ān like this. I never knew. I've been raised a Muslim. I never knew this. You know. Like I didn't have to rely on a difficult translation to makes sense of Qur'ān. It was making sense. So, I got really attached to him emotionally even though he didn't know who I was. I was just one person in the audience. So, I went up to him afterwards and said, I'm amazed by what you do and I want to do that one day. He said okay, learn Arabic. I was like, how do I learn Arabic? He was like, come to my class. I'm starting in a week. So, I started going to Flushing [mosque] (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 24 September 2013).

According to Khan Abdus Samie was a dentist by profession but studied with Dr Israr Ahmed for two decades. He was in New York around the month of Ramadan to teach and lead the prayer. "This guy is, like, living it!" Khan recalls, describing his ascetic lifestyle – with two sets of clothes, one pair of slippers and a handbag. He slept on the carpet of the mosque floor with a

pillow and a sheet the mosque provided. He made an impression on Khan and after class the two would spend time talking about spirituality and self-sacrifice. "Either he's sleeping or he's teaching someone or he's praying." Khan's attraction to Abdus Samie went beyond his teaching. Unlike Ahmed, he didn't see Abdus Samie as philosophical.

He was the everyman's man. He could give a lecture to a cab driver and he would get it. That was him. So, between these two was the spectrum of Qur'ānic studies for me. Very in-depth, very abstract, very philosophical even and very down to earth. The Qur'ān is talking to you. You just get it (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 24 September 2013).

It is this dialogue between the Qur'ān and its reader that Khan works to emulate. He encourages students to see the language as a link to Prophet Muhammad. "There is something to be said about speaking the language of the Messenger of Allah. To be able to speak in words that were spoken to him. That's an act of love," he says. His words drop off into silence as the students stare back from their seats. Hyping them up more, Khan continues, "I want you guys to be the people that are on the ground reviving clean Arabic in the U.S. We are going to raise a generation that is going to speak beautiful clean crisp Arabic that will be the Muslim second language." He adds a poetic touch to inspire them not to focus solely on getting good grades on their weekly quizzes. "When you speak to each other in Arabic, the heart starts beating in sync. It's a beautiful thing. I won't grade you on it. I won't push you but if you push yourself because you love it, then you will benefit from it," he advises. There isn't any question on what would be considered 'unclean' Arabic, nor where Khan has acquired this knowledge of biological science to determine that impact of the Arabic language on the heartbeat of two people. Nevertheless, the students silently nod. They soon begin to pepper their speech with Arabic words inside and outside of classroom. Some of the young women go further and institute Arabic-only speaking during their lunch outings.

Khan encourages them to learn special terms for other reasons as well. “If you want to sound impressive you can use these terms,” he says during one session, “but I’m not going to test you on them.” “It’s good to sound intelligent. It’s good to sound impressive,” he adds in another classroom tangent. He makes a joke about some of the ways someone who hasn’t studied the language may talk about the content they are learning in class. Smirking, he tells the students “You can go and say, ‘You’re not a *Dream* student, are you?’” demonstrating that they are in a privileged position as a student in his programme. Much of this muddies his early advice to fix their intentions and do this for God, to get closer to him. Yet it remains appealing to students.

Memorisation

A key part of students’ language learning is memorisation, from the phrases that the students commit to memory every morning to the rules of grammar and morphology. At times Khan is firm and pauses the lesson, “We’re not moving on until you memorise this.” In these instances, the students work in pairs to commit the specific linguistic constructions to memory. Some of the women laugh with one another as they create a little rap to help them. Another two high-five one another to celebrate their success. Their laughter subsides a bit and voices lower all around as Khan, having stepped from the dais, circulates on their side of the divider. When they finish and he tests them, his pride is evident, “That’s what a class that knows its stuff sounds like,” he says.

Memorisations acts as a building block for Khan’s authority, an element of his early days in Saudi Arabia and his days in New York City as a budding preacher. He remembers the loud bell signalling the opening and closing of the F train pausing in its race through the tunnels from

Manhattan to Brooklyn, as he memorised chapters of the Qur'ān commuting to and from college. It was this stored memory that he would pull from when he lectured at different Muslim Student Association events across the five boroughs. Despite the assumption that memorisation is synonymous with rote education – often purported to fail in bringing about learning gains – Khan highlights the activity as being the core of Islamic Studies.

Memorisation is at the heart of Islamic Studies. Without memorisation, you're not really doing Islamic Studies. You're studying about Islam but you're not studying Islam itself. Islam is so intertextual. There's always cross-referencing and the cross-referencing isn't just looking things up but it's all supposed to happen in your head. There are constantly connections being made by scholars and by students of one *āyah* to another. The Qur'ān by its literary design is meant to be highly intertextual, meaning an *āyah* makes you think about another *āyah*, makes you think about another *āyah*. From its subject matter to its style, to an expression used... 'wait I saw this expression [says an expression] I saw that other places. And it's only in five places. Let's compare those five places.' So... Islamic Studies, especially Qur'ānic studies, is highly dependent on memorisation (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Khan holds to a popular understanding of the role of memorisation in a tradition of knowledge acquisition and transmission. Whilst this may occur with a teacher in his or her own scholarly research, the ability to exhibit this in front of an audience shows the prowess of a religious preacher. Nonetheless, Khan sees memorisation as a necessary element for any cursory level of embodiment. This stands in direct opposition to the technological tools that facilitate the spread of knowledge. For Khan, the computer becomes a block.

I don't think actually that studying years of Arabic without memorising Qur'ān will get you far with Qur'ān studies. It won't. Because you see the *āyāt* you've memorised and studied, that vocabulary, and that grammar and that tafsīr is in your head for life. It will come up.... you won't have to go dig it up on your laptop, it will just be... will just be on the tip of your tongue. Like I remember what this *āyah* is about. I remember what that *āyah* is about. It becomes yours. Without memorisation, it doesn't become yours. It's just something you've heard... But the people who memorised the same sūra they've heard,

and study Arabic and then did that, it's just a completely different thing. They own it, you know (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Besides passing test scores, students are required to memorise *Sūra al-Kahf* from the Qur'ān to successfully complete the programme. Throughout the programme, Khan provides an explanation of these verses to connect lessons in the chapter to students' lives. The choice of this chapter serves a larger purpose for Khan. "[The] number one reason, they're going to recite it every Friday, which means they'll review the Dream programme every Friday," he explains, laughing.

The other thing is it's Makkan Qur'ān so it's linguistically harder than Madani Qur'ān. So, if you can navigate that, a good chunk of Makkan Qur'ān is done. You're okay, you know. Umm... then the additional benefits are just there. The *sūra* has an incredible insight into contemporary problems... and from beginning to end it is believed to address the fitna (tribulations) of the last age to come. Which means it deals with a problem that will come way into the future. And if we believe we are way out into the future then it has a lot of problems that it addresses that we have, right (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

These are the Breaks

When the men leave the classroom in and around their breaks, they often congregate in the main lounge area. I'm given access to these spaces and walk between them talking to students. Walking through the back door of the classroom, the first carpeted room serves as a prayer space for the young men. A mixture of different colognes lingers in the air. Cushions are thrown on the floor against the left-facing walls. One small room off to the right is for audio-visual work and houses multiple computer screens with Khan's face on them. The videographer records the sessions as Khan teaches to build a repository of videos for other platforms and future programmes. It is part of Khan's effort to prototype the class on the popular Khan

Academy model, whereby he will lecture less and students can use videos for self-directed learning. The videos also feed into Bayyinah's YouTube channel. In the next room, a pool table sits in the centre and two rooms are off to the side. One is Khan's office and the other a room for general meetings. Walking through the door leads you back into the black tiled lobby area, where Khan's father sits at the front desk. At the end of the wall, opposite his desk, is the door to 'the blue room', the main lounge area for the men. Glass windows run along the right and back wall of the room, brown cloth sofas underneath. Vultures sit on the ledge on the other side of the window – named "Bayyinah mascots" – under the city skyline. A large LCD screen with a blinking router above it is mounted on the front wall with a game console for student entertainment and a small coffee table underneath. A dry erase board resides next to it. The left wall is lined with eight framed photographs of Middle Eastern landscapes in which a man in Eastern garb moves about – walking, praying, travelling. There are four brown sofas, two pushed together facing the screen and the other two perpendicular to them on opposite sides, making a u-shape. Students sit on the opposite facing sofas under the windows when having lunch. A ping pong table sits towards the back of the room. It is a source of much delight for the students but also allows for more interaction with Khan.

On one of my visits to the room, Khan enters, slips off his shoes and picks up a paddle, swinging it in the air. "First year I got beat a lot," he says as he positions himself on one side of the table. "But they were the worst students I had," he states. One of the young men picks up a paddle and makes his way over to the table. Another group sits eating lunch on the sofas, watching the match. After several back and front hits, Khan beats two of the students. One of the young members of staff comes in. "Ustādh, they're waiting for a tour," he says to Khan.

Undistracted from the game, Khan replies, "You can give the tour. You don't need me." "They want to meet you," the staffer persists. "It's okay you can do it and then after they can meet me," Khan says, over the sound of the ball hitting the table then the paddles. At one point, Khan misses a shot, "Oooohhh! And then he misses!" yells a student. "C'mon Jawad," another yells, excitedly, "we believe in you. Finish him!" But Jawad misses his winning shot. Another student comes up to the table. He takes the paddle with one hand, his other arm in a cast. Back and forth the ball bounces, "I don't like you, Bilal. Your cast distracts me," Khan teases. After beating four students, Khan drops the paddle on the table and slides back into his shoes, leaving the room.

When he's not with the young men, Khan is either in his office or in the classroom attending to the questions of the women. During one class break, the young women queue against the divider in the room, patiently waiting one behind the other. "It looks like a queue for the girls' bathroom," jokes one of the seated women. From the other side of the divider, the young men walk directly up the dais, stopping in front of Khan to ask a question. After finishing talking with one, he stops the next from beginning and motions for one of the women to come forward. Some students remain in the classroom on both sides of the divider, going over their notes, eating a snack at their desk, or on their computers. Other students make their way into their designated lounge areas or go into the kitchen to have a snack.

In the women's section, there are four lounge areas. The main lounge connected to the classroom is painted burgundy and holds several brown-clothed sofas. The young women, in need of sleep, throw themselves down or curl up on their sides for a short nap. Their peers sit around them chatting, while others have made their way down the corridor from the classroom and are in the designated room for women who bring their children to class. There are few

women who have children, making the room spacious enough to house a ping pong table which the women use infrequently.

Establishing Relationships

On a typical class day, one of the young women incorrectly answers a question Khan's has asked. He picks up a marker from his desk and throws it down onto the floor between the dais and the first row of seats on the women's side. Laughter erupts around the classroom. She pauses for a bit, rethinking her answer and then corrects the grammatical structure of the sentence. "I don't know why I said I that," she says shyly. "You don't know?" Khan questions sardonically. She smiles and continues her grammatical analysis of the sentence. As she continues, Khan picks up a pair of scissors and a sheet of tissue, then starts to cut it slowly, his eyes trained on the young woman. The performance is more for the rest of the class than the student, as the young woman's eyes are on her paper. Yet, sensing something amiss, she looks up and stumbles over her answer. "Don't look over here, pay attention to the paper," Khan says. "I can't!" she quips back. Khan puts down the scissors and smiles. She returns to the paper and completes her answer. This type of interaction is characteristic of Khan's teaching style but it is limited to the classroom. As one young woman comments, "[He] acts chill and everything but outside of class he won't really talk to you."

It is not always fun and games in class. One time, Khan makes his frustration clear when he comments on students asking a question he's already answered. "This is a pretty good indication that you're not paying attention," he says, staring at both sides of the room in turn. "It's inconsiderate to your fellow students... be a bit more sensible and sensitive," he advises. The congenial classroom climate that Khan endeavours to engender comes with some

drawbacks. The dynamics of the classroom differ on each side of the divide. The young men have more personal time with Khan and, as a result, are a bit lackadaisical in their interaction with him. Sometimes they talk amongst themselves whilst Khan is speaking to the class. "I'll wait for them to stop talking," Khan says one morning while staring at two young men sitting in the front row. "No forget about them," another student says, waiting for Khan to answer a question. "No, no, I'll wait. It's rude to interrupt," Khan stoically retorts. Another student hushes the young men in the back of the class. Then, there are the habitually late students, the ones who sleep in class, those on their phones, others watching sports games on their laptops. A WhatsApp chat group serves as a way for them to communicate with one another inside and outside of class. There are jokes that often take the shape of memes and pictures of the projector screen when those in the back can't see. The irony of their interaction is that Khan is in the group and is aware of the messages that are sent during class. They persist nonetheless.

Over the first few weeks the young men also develop a habit of interrupting the flow of class when anyone from their side answers a question correctly. "*Takbir*," one student would yell and the young men break out in unison, "*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar*," (God is the greatest) for a minute or so. I see the young women rolling their eyes. Khan doesn't stop them. One of the young female staffers gathers the students together many days later day to come up with a way to counter this. "In Ghana, there is a clap we do for someone to praise them," she says to the group. Two slow claps, three fast ones, and one to round off. They practice three times and walk away excitedly. "Clap for her!" is the signal for the women to break out into the clap.

When class is out for the day the students head home, to coffee shops, to part-time jobs, or hang back in the class. For those who remain behind, the divider doesn't pose an obstacle to

interacting with one another. These late afternoon interactions raise concerns from some of the young women who look askance at their classmates when they talk to the young men. “They don’t listen to the advice ustādh gives in class regarding personal development. They think it’s about someone outside of themselves – like in the umma. Like he’s talking about other people not them,” one young woman says angrily. Another mentions her annoyance at people using their phones during class or talking in class when the teacher is speaking. These are all signs of what they see as blatant disrespect.

Scholar Visits

Over the course of the nine months, popular religious teachers from the local area visit to give short motivational talks to the students. Dallas has become home to five of the most sought after American Muslim teachers. At the start of these visits, the message of their speech is the same – providing students with a reminder of how lucky they are to be in the programme. “So, I’m here to give some advice and from hajj, I’m thinking about how many people would love to be in your place,” one guest teacher says. “You are envied by many people. The way you live up to that is the most important thing,” he says soberly. Another teacher’s comments are similar, “Thousands of people around the world are looking to here, where you are, to study the language of the Qur’ān, the language of Allah.” These teachers also talk about the role of knowledge, “When the Rasul (messenger) talks about ‘ilm he talks about how knowledge gives status. Allah when he talks about knowledge, he has raised those with knowledge degrees. ‘Ilm elevates.” one teacher reminds students. On a different day, another teacher mentions the connection between learning and travel.

We travelled to many different places to study. This is a legacy of the anbiyā' (prophets), the saḥāba – the students of knowledge. You have to take the journey if you want to become a real student of knowledge. Without that journey, being in the comfort of your own home town, it's not the same. This is a step to the ākhirah (afterlife) (Y. Birjas, lecture, 21 November 2013).

It's unclear how students reconcile the need to travel outside of one's home to be seen as legitimate students, when Khan has encouraged them to remain in their home country. The speaker continues, "If you really learn proper Arabic language, these books are no longer artefacts and they become gates for heaven. Right now, you think of them as references," he says. However, the messaging becomes a bit jumbled as he relates this to their intention and the need for it to be pure. "Why are you studying Arabic," he rhetorically asks. "Hopefully not because of movies or to impress people, but to comprehend and learn text to get you closer to Allah. If your intention is not this then it's like that of college where you just take a class and finish with it," he declares.

Renew your intention. Realise how many people envy you... Allah chose you for a reason so you need to say alhamdulillah (praise God) and always think what you can do with the knowledge and if it is bringing you closer to Allah. And if not, then Allah will hold you accountable for this. Make dua' (supplication) that Allah allows you to live up to this and to do full justice to this (Y. Birjas, lecture, 21 November 2013).

Each of the visiting speakers agree that the Dream students are in a privileged position, chosen ones – studying Arabic with someone who has the skill that Khan demonstrates across the world. The approach is tinted with a 'prosperity gospel' hue that is problematic for the way in which Islamic tradition is transmitted. However, much of what the teachers communicate creates a degree of dissonance between Khan's own claims of not being a scholar, thus unable to give knowledge to place one on a path of scholarship, and many of the students' desire to

understand the Qur'an for their own personal practice, rather than being furnished with a prerequisite for induction into higher education institutions on a path of Islamic scholarship.

Late one morning, a popular preacher who speaks on Qur'an recitation – also, incidentally, Khan's brother-in-law at the time – visits the class. A *hafidh* (memoriser) of the Qur'an, he now teaches Qur'anic recitation through his website and gives lectures around the country. He is in his early 30s, of medium height and slim build. He sports a full black beard and his hair skirts the top of his standing collar. An army green tunic loosely falling over pressed white loose slacks and his thumb toe poking out of from the leather sandals that encase his bare feet give the impression of a stereotypical Indian guru. His lecture is a full-bodied performance. After a recitation of an opening prayer, he comments on individuals who study Islam but lack faith. "Orientalist professors know more about Islam than everyone in here but it means nothing because it's not beneficial," he states. He implores students to recognise the special nature of the text, "The recitation of Qur'an is not speech. It's the direct T1 connect to your heart with Allah," he says, using a technological metaphor. He asks the students to stand.

Stand with your toes facing forward. Line up your knees and your hips. Find the crest of your hip, then line that up with your shoulder. Then just turn. This is your sternum it makes all of the white blood cells of your body, immunity, and *hidaya* (guidance), direct connection. Breathe in through your nose, now suck it in through your mouth. Then let it out, like a Pepsi can. This is what you should do before salah (W. Sharieff, lecture, 10 October 2013).

Continuing in a soft modulated tone, he guides the students through a set of breathing exercises.

"In through the nose two times. Hold your diaphragm. This allows you to get access to 25% of your lungs. Don't let the abdomen go. Seek it. Recite it. Begin it. Recite the word 'Allah'," he instructs. The students mimic his behaviour and breathe out the name of God. He stops them

and models it for them, “Use your whole tongue. Let me hear the ‘ha,’” he requests. He strolls over towards the women’s side but doesn’t turn his gaze towards them. He stops at the window, looks out and walks back. He crosses over to the men’s side and stops in front of the first student. He picks up the phone from the table and sees that the student is recording the session. “Look at this guy,” he says. The student smiles cheekily. He moves back to the centre of the room and the students, still reciting, follow him in rapt attention, much to his dismay. “You’re looking at me. You’re reciting for me. Recite for Allah,” he says in appeal. He recites the verses of the first chapter of the Qur’ān and the students repeat after him. He stops at different points and explains some of the words. He’s illustrative in his use of his body, slapping his hands against one another to demonstrate the sound of a word. He slowly closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, then recites another verse. His right hand comes up suddenly and snaps down at the end of the verse like a maestro. He encourages them to feel the words. “Live here,” he says, pointing to his abdomen, “As a poor person does. You're living up here,” he points to his head. He then implores students to be more physically engaged with the Qur’ān: “listen, absorb.” Citing the outcomes of this type of engagement that have been documented from Muslim converts, he says, “Remember people have heard Qur’ān and become Muslim. Not because they have read it and understood.” As the session ends, he asks the students to raise their hands for a group supplication. As he raises his own hands, he positions them in specific way, simultaneously explaining the different ways Prophet Muhammad raised his hands. “He used to line his wrists to his clavicle,” he tells. The students do the same and they recite a prayer in unison.

The bodily exercises in which the students participated are in stark contrast to the memorisation and grammar analysis they do during their daily classes. When the session is

finished, the young men are buzzed with excitement. “This guy is great. He’s amazing,” one of them says. “My brain is through the wall. It’s not on the wall, it’s through the wall,” one student exclaims. His friend concurs, “Usually I’m really intellectual, but that was amazing!”

Qur’ānic Arabic Literacy

Khan sees the Qur’ān as a unifier, saying it is “the lifeblood of this umma”. The source. He asserts that his aim is to bring the Qur’ān into public Muslim discourse, which seems to assume it isn’t already. Mid-way through the programme, he tells students that he wants them to be able to understand the words they recite in prayer. “How cool is that, you know what’s being said when you’re standing praying *taraweh*,” he says. He uses humour as a technique, though he endeavours to remain respectful of tradition. Khan articulates that he acknowledges the importance of the legacy of classical Muslim intellectuals but considers the Qur’ān and Sunnah as the only textual sources beyond critique. He implies that the exegetical texts of revered scholars should be critiqued by modern thinkers to develop understandings for the current sociohistorical context. He stresses that the secondary body of literature, which serves as a source for contemporary religious teachers, should not be given priority over the primary sources, the Qur’ān and Sunnah.

Islamic tradition is the scholarly legacy of Islam and the social norms that came as a result. Okay. They are worthy of respect. They are not under subject of ridicule, but they are also not beyond criticism. The only thing to me beyond criticism, that you cannot criticise, is the sacred text, Qur’ān and sunnah. Now, I believe that at some point in our history, a shift happened. The original focus of our society was the sacred text. And all of our scholarship was about trying to understand the sacred text. And so, we produced this secondary body of literature to understand the sacred text. Then over time there was so much secondary literature that our focus shifted towards the secondary text being our primary focus. So, what if you study Qur’ān, if you haven’t studied these tafāsir you haven’t studied anything. If you haven’t gone through these fiqh books, these aqīda texts... you know, we developed these texts, which was a natural consequence of studying the original sacred text, to begin with, but they started taking primary

importance... Those secondary texts represent Islam itself. And anyone actually going to the primary is blasphemous or has no regard for scholarship or is gonna be misguided. The literalist says, 'Forget about all this scholarship stuff. Just tell me what the hadith says, man. Tell me what the *āyah* says.' That's what I'm gonna do. I lie somewhere in between. What do I mean? I would like to study the Qur'ān correctly. I would like to study the best scholarship I can find on the Qur'ān and I would like to reserve the right to be able to ask critical questions of that scholarship (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Whilst Khan advocates for giving classical texts their due, distancing himself from preachers or scholars that call for abandoning these secondary sources, his approach is out of alignment with tradition, especially given his lack of training in any of the transmitted or rational sciences. Were one to place the secondary sources alongside an interpretative approach to the primary text, given the presence of training in the structures of interpreting the primary texts and understanding the secondary sources, which many scholars do, perhaps this could be considered as a middle approach. Nonetheless, Khan has developed his own *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān, whilst insisting he is not a scholar, just an Arabic teacher or an 'education activist'. However, his grammatical analysis of the text, which leads to a specific reshaping of an understanding of tradition, draws boundaries for acceptable religious practice, providing life advice to students, which is beyond the remit of a language teacher.

The lengths to which Khan's interpretation extends are vital to understanding his view on education and the role of teachers, as well as qualifications one should have to interpret texts. Khan aims to create replicas of himself by inciting an interest in the Qur'ān. The personal stories he shares are aimed at creating a relationship with students and helping them to realise they can do what he has done. "I want you to be convinced that you can learn this thing," he says to students. "I want mini Noumans," he declares. The students laugh, though it is already understood. "We are Dumbledore's army," one of the young men joked weeks prior. "You need

to have certain academic prerequisites, after, there is the place of the inquisitive mind,” he says in response to a question of a student regarding the validity of every person’s own rational opinion on issues.

However, his comments stand in contrast to those made a few weeks before the holy month of Ramadan in 2015, a year after the nine-month programme I attended. Khan makes an impromptu visit to the Islamic Society student group at the University of Oxford, where I am a student. Invited to give a short lecture, he begins by stating his intention of helping the general audience enjoy a productive month up ahead. He encourages them to draw closer to the Qur’ān and attempt to find meaning within it for themselves. Khan emboldens them to get over their fear of not being able to approach the text by telling students that qualifications aren’t important. It’s a strange statement to make at one of the world’s most prestigious educational institutions. Khan’s opinion draws from his understanding of a verse²⁶ in the Qur’ān that tells of a conversation between group of *jinn*s who overheard Prophet Muhammad reciting Qur’ān. With no previous knowledge of the Qur’ān, they discuss the verses and are impacted by the depth of meaning they find within them, Khan explains. Using this as an example, he prompts students to begin their own foray into understanding the Qur’ān. Khan’s disregard for qualifications, often considered necessary to approach the text, is surprising, as the absence of Arabic language skill often prevents one from getting the depth of understanding from verses of the primary text that one would reach with formal study. However, it fits within the narrative of Khan’s own training regarding the language.

Knowledge, the more you share with other people, it increases with you. But if you hold on tight to it, it will just go away. It becomes obsolete. The best way to benefit is for you

²⁶ *Sūra* 46 verses 29-32

to teach. Specifically, when you learn language, the one obstacle is the embarrassment when you say the wrong word. I, myself, as a living example, it's a self-taught thing. I came here 14 years ago I didn't attend any classes here. All I did was self-taught effort to learn the language to teach the people. Allah sent to every people a messenger who speaks their tongue. What came to my mind when I came here is, if I'm going to be successful I have to learn to speak to the people. The way I learned, it was the most unconventional way (N. Khan, lecture, 21 November 2013).

The unconventional approach has given Khan much popularity and it gives his audience hope that they can and should be doing the same thing – learning the language and then interpreting the Qur'ān on their own terms as thinking human beings. Many of Khan's students endeavour to be just like him: "I want to be the female Nouman Ali Khan," one says. Khan provides tips and guidance to those who hope to follow in his footsteps. When it comes to the initial translation he goes phrase by phrase, telling students "You go from Arabic to English from Arabic to English, so you build the listener's confidence." Repetition is also key, he says, "Don't ever be embarrassed about repeating something Qur'ān says. It's not a movie. It's a reminder. And every time it has a benefit." He continues instructing them in rhetoric, "Tone it down. Don't share everything. Keep yourself to a limit. Be short, concise, easy to follow." With successful completion of Dream, students hope to have the initial tools to emulate his method of teaching and some ability to develop a base level understanding of the Qur'ānic verses. Yet they remain in awe of Khan's ability to find meanings that they have never come across before, Khan's "gems". He encourages them to "Know one example, you know it well, one gem you know it well." One of the young men asks Khan, "Is there a gem book?" hoping to cull all of Khan's gems into one place. "Yea, it's called the Qur'ān," one of his classmates responds, attempting to bring him back into focus.

Special Days and Nights

On Fridays, students have a quiz in the morning and the rest of the day free. A timer is set up on the projector screens. Students are only allowed to enter the classroom with writing instruments. At 8am the lead teacher sits at the dais to proctor the quiz she's written. Heads down, students work as time runs down. Some students broach the dais to get clarity on the questions. Some of the young women later joke that one of the young men went up more than once to ask a question just to have an excuse to talk to the lead teacher. A romance is in the making.

After the exam, students disperse to different places for breakfast or back home to sleep before Friday prayer. The local religious teachers, imams, or visiting scholars give the Friday sermon in mosques in the area. Students often determine which mosque to attend based on who is giving the sermon. Sometimes there are outings where Khan treats the students to time hanging out with him in pizza places or ice cream parlours. This is mostly for the young men, as the gender segregation persists at these outings and he remains inaccessible to the women.

On select Fridays, the students attend *qiyām-ul-layl* (standing at night) sessions in the mosque with Khan. The term refers to the practice of Prophet Muhammad getting up at night to stand in prayer. Muslims are encouraged to perform the supererogatory prayer between the time of the night and dawn prayers. On these Fridays, students attend the mosque where Khan is leading the Friday prayer. Many of the young men are in their Friday best – some wearing clothing indigenous to their culture, others wearing the Arab *jalabiyya*. Similarly, the women are in semi-formal clothing – many in more elaborate black *abayas*, others in dressy Pakistani *shalwar kameez*. When the female students enter the women's section at the mosque they are

singled out by the older women. After prayer, many of the aunties ask them about themselves. Their status as *Dream* students makes them coveted potential daughters-in-law. Lunch is brought in from outside after the prayer and thereafter, students spend the time before the sunset prayer in and around the mosque, reading *Sūra al-Kahf* from the Qur'ān, socialising, or playing basketball. The men and women steer clear of each other, although quick exchanges occur in the parking lot or mosque lobby.

Structuring it to provide students with Arabic knowledge but also instil reflection over what and why they are learning the language, Khan breaks the evening into different sessions. He's exchanged his suit and tie for traditional Pakistani dress, a long tunic with a white t-shirt peeking out at his neck, over loose trousers. Ignoring the camera set up to record his session, he chooses some verses in the first session to review with the students. He says his first objective is to re-centre the Qur'ān. "Knowledge is not a direction," he says, "It's blind... without thinking, knowledge won't be beneficial." In doing so he reinforces his role as a key authoritative interlocutor of the text, a new interpretative voice like those before him.

Qur'ān is the way thought is supposed to be... the vast majority of the Qur'ān is an invitation to thought, not knowledge. We've created a taboo around thinking and [we] are focused on knowledge. When someone says, 'it's not what you think brother, it's what's already been said,' this is not correct. Everyone before us that we have been quoting, they've thought. The legacy of the saḥāba (companions of Prophet Muhammad) is not what they said but the fact that they said it (N.A. Khan, lecture, 22 November 2013).

By focusing on thought as opposed to knowledge itself, Khan positions himself as being someone who is developing new knowledge based on his own thinking and direct contact with the text. The men sit in a circle around him on the green carpet in the first section of the mosque. The women sit on the grey carpet of the second section of the main mosque area, behind the men --

giving them less visible access to Khan. It's a change from their classroom arrangement. Yet still, most of the women sit with their notebooks and pens, jotting down notes, in contrast to their male peers. Young children or relatives of some of the students sit playing quietly amongst the young women. Students listen to three short lectures by Khan interspersed by breaks and open question and answer sessions over the course of the night. The young men ask questions which are inaudible to the women in the back. Khan repeats their questions. The women must raise their voices to be heard by Khan in the front. Some write their questions on short pieces of paper and pass them up to the front, choosing not to raise their voices in front of the men.

Khan's commentary on the Qur'ān and connection to the students is achieved by projecting a sense of humility and demonstrating a shared identity, whereby students feel as though he understands their challenges as American youth, and also South Asian. In addition, he pieces together information from popular psychology, science – telling the students he's studied it in college – an unverified claim – and the effects of post-modernism, “spirituality being choked to death,” to support his exegetical commentary. The heads of the women are down in their notebooks while the heads of the men are raised looking at Khan. At times, I see one of the young men take off his glasses and wipe his eyes, another lowers his head, shaking it slowly. Khan finishes his lecture and sets out the schedule for the remainder of the night. “45-min talk followed by 45 minutes of Qur'ān memorisation. Just sit and recite Qur'ān. After 'isha I'll chat with you as much as you want,” he says. The group breaks up.

Some of the young women approach Khan to ask a question. Others stand and move a mobile barrier in front of the room off to the side of the main prayer area so they can sit with the door open but maintain a degree of privacy. Blankets, pillows, and sleeping bags lie strewn

around the carpeted area. Phones are plugged into outlets around the mosque and students temporarily retire to different rooms to read Qur'ān from books or their mobile phones. The place is abuzz with melodic murmurs of Arabic. Khan is pacing back and forth from the door of the mosque to the main prayer area, kicking his feet up as he walks with a copy of the Qur'ān in hand. One of the young men comes up and breaks his stride to ask him about the meaning of a word. He answers and continues his pacing.

By the early morning, the number of students present for Khan's lecture is much less than in the evening. Many of the women remain asleep from the long night. The young men have no choice but to get up, given that they are sleeping in the main prayer hall. There are a few women in the shadows, in the section behind them. However, everyone rises when the call to the pre-dawn prayer is made. Lethargically, everyone makes their way to the main hall for prayer. The short prayer complete, students gather up their sleeping items and pile into their cars. The remainder of Saturday will be their only time off from class.

Sunday is designated story time. Khan often uses the first part of the morning to run through material for his 'Story Night' programme which travels across the country.

Story Night is enrichment. You walk away excited about the Qur'ān. You want to learn more about it. You felt like 'I never knew Musa, peace be upon him, like that before. That is awesome!' Kids love it. Moms love it. Teens love it. I want people to be excited about the din. That's the experience itself. A lot of people back in the 90s, we used to call it 'hype'. People go to conferences, they get all excited and nothing comes of it. I don't underestimate that. People getting excited about the religion can be life-changing. That emotion itself can transform somebody's life (N.A. Khan, personal communication, 1 October 2013).

Students sit in rapt attention while Khan goes through his lecture. They laugh and some even wipe tears from their eyes. It is also one of the rare times that students are prevented from

asking questions. “When you ask me something when I'm giving class for Qur’ān it messes up my thought process. During Arabic class, I don't mind but... but like the Arabs say, every speech has a time and place,” he says, repeating the last line in the form of an Arab proverb.

Khan also uses popular movies dubbed in Arabic or historical fiction renditions of Muslim heroes to offer resources familiar to students. He tells students that he used cartoons to facilitate his own language learning. Pedagogically, he links this to memory, not only to “Plagiarise things you can say yourself,” he says, but also “... because visual memory makes it easier to remember the phrase.” The classical Arabic spoken in Kung-Fu Panda serves to teach students new words and solidify grammatical concepts. Similarly, the choice of the cartoon *Salahuddin* (Saladin d. 1193) dubbed in classical Arabic provides students with language practice and knowledge of Islamic history. On these days, Khan plays and stops the film to ask students to repeat words in a scene and then requests someone to provide the English translation. Ironically enough, the young women discuss the women characters in the movie during the break, not the language exercises. “They are either too aggressive and hyper-sexualised, or they are meek and have no personality. Why can’t they just make someone who is normal?” one of the women complains about the female character in the *Salahuddin* cartoon film. Her peers nod their heads in agreement. “I bet ustādh didn’t think that a conversation on this would happen just from showing *Salahuddin*,” one of them comments with a grin.

Graduation

At the end of the nine months, it’s bittersweet for some, a relief for others, and just the beginning for the rest of the students. Many are happy to be going back home to their families and community, others are going to miss out on the sense of community they developed. A few

others are over it all – grateful for what they have learned but tired of the community constraints. Many students have elected to remain in Dallas to join Khan’s army-team or continue to benefit from the religious scholarship available in another new local programme training Muslim community youth leaders. A formal graduation ceremony is set to take place in the local conference centre. When I pull into the parking lot, some of the students are getting out of their cars. Family members have flown in from different parts of the country and mill around the lobby as we walk in. The young men stroll into the hall, pulling on their dark suit jackets and adjusting their burgundy ties against white shirts. Their shoes are silent on the carpet as they cross over to the designated gendered areas. All the young women are outfitted in black *abayas*, an embroidered floral design in white and red threads circle their cuffs. They’ve added their own personal flair through the styling of their red headscarves. Their teaching assistants are dressed similarly except for their grey coloured headscarves. Many of them have pinned their scarves to their long dress with pins that read ‘bayyinah’ in Arabic.

Just before show time, the group of men and women line up at the two back entrances of the auditorium. The large room is set up with folding chairs in four sections, one on each far side of the room for families and one for male and female students in the middle. Framed certificates, with students’ names written on pastel coloured paper in Arabic calligraphy, sit on large tables on each side of the auditorium. The head teachers lead in the men and women. They are followed by students from Bayyinah’s part-time Arabic programme that runs in the evenings. The institute’s name is written in white block letters in the middle panel of a three-panelled podium. Arabic script in black lines is on the other two auburn panels. A large white curtain and a smaller red one at the centre serve as a backdrop to the stage from which speeches are made by

guests, Khan, and the top-performing male and female students. As in class, there is much laughter and many tears, both before and after the ceremony.

Beginning with the women, Khan calls each of their names. They make their way to the stage, stopping at the table to collect their certificate from one of the staff manning the table and then climb up on to the stage. When all the names are called, the young women stand in two bunched rows across the stage with Khan at the centre. They pause for a picture before leaving the stage. The process is repeated for the young men. As the night dies down it seems to be a bit surreal. Introductions are done between friends and family members. There are tight hugs and farewell tears. They all seem to be surprised it is finally over as they prepare to proceed down new paths with a different understanding of their role as actors in the construction of tradition and new-found confidence in developing and understanding of Qur'ān on their own terms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how the *Dream* programme, as constructed by a popular religious teacher, prioritises knowledge of the Arabic language to adjust the ways in which American Muslims engage with the Qur'ān. The teacher provides formal instruction in grammar, morphology, speaking, and exegetical strategies, to facilitate a development of students' own understanding of Qur'ān and religious practice. The teacher uses resources from popular culture, to make aspects of the language relevant, and combines classroom learning with visits to local establishments (ice cream parlours, home dinners, mosque visits) to develop a relationship with students in a social setting. This contact is, however, limited to men. Visits to mosques on Friday and late-night prayer offer students more contact time with the teacher and create a learning

community around a religious practice. This temporary community follows guidelines related to dress, fraternisation, public social behaviour and reflective practices to encourage a modified form of religious practice upon returning home. Their participation is positioned as raising them in rank amongst the general public, who only have access to the teacher via online engagements and one-off programmes.

As evidenced in the previous chapters, Arabic language proficiency is a key element in the construction of religious authority, and is buttressed when combined with cultural knowledge. However, unlike the other chapters, which presupposed training in rational and revealed sciences, and academic training in a secular university, this chapter highlights how elements of a shared identity combine with language dexterity and cultural fluency to afford legitimacy to autodidacts. This mixture establishes the role of personal charisma and illustrates the dialectical process in which teachers and students engage in developing tradition. The personal connection the teacher attempts to establish with students, the use of his own personal narrative as an immigrant growing up in New York city during his emergent adulthood, and his own religious educational training, align with previous findings which showed how teachers narrate their own histories, asserting cultural authority, and couple it with religious authority to outline the confines of acceptable practice. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates how religious teachers simultaneously position themselves as legitimate interlocutors of religious texts by reshaping presuppositions of tradition via the use of Arabic language and the level of access it provides for one when it comes to understanding the primary texts.

CHAPTER 8: THE ROLE OF TEMPORARY AND ONLINE SPACES IN RECREATING A DISCURSIVE TRADITION

This narrative ethnography has sought to offer an understanding of the place of knowledge and authority in the education of American Muslims, who grapple with what it means to be Muslim in the contemporary world. To be Muslim can be seen as living within the imagined landscape of recorded pasts. Hence, religious teachers reconfigure Islamic tradition, developing the contours within which students can understand their location in and orientation to the modern world. Whilst primacy is given to keeping the ethos of tradition intact, the development of authentic culturally nuanced understandings of Islam in these learning environments suggests that identifying this very ethos and attributing a certain level of coherency is under constant negotiation. As Asad states:

There's always a tension between this construction of limits and the forces that push the tradition onto new terrain, where parts or all of the tradition ceases to make sense and so needs a new beginning. (Scott, 2006, p. 289)

In this final chapter, I begin by presenting how student narratives contribute to an understanding of where traditional orientations are no longer sufficient and how intensive learning environments, along with online representations of religious authority, contribute to the project of maintaining Islamic tradition. The biographies of teachers, as discussed in the previous chapters, serve to elucidate my use of Campbell's (2007) multi-layer framework, to parse through religious authority offline and online. Accordingly, this attends to the process of education that young Muslims experience wherein teachers maintain their authority by positioning themselves within the narratives of the tradition they articulate.

This larger discussion is couched within the literature presented in the introduction and first two chapters, namely, Asad's (1986) initial conception of Islamic tradition as a discursive tradition, and the roles of classical textual interlocutors. My final contribution argues for more attention towards the ways in which religious teachers use transmedial education structures to recalibrate tradition in order to remain responsive to the ways young American Muslims construct their identities. I move for reflection on Meyrowitz's (1985) claim that technology triggers a loss of a sense of place. I argue that the pervasiveness of technology and the prevalence of online representations of religious authority create a need for offline sites, given the many ways in which an analysis of online frameworks hides dimensions of authority that are only revealed in offline spaces. Furthermore, tensions which arise between online and offline representations, as highlighted in the analysis below, demonstrate how intra-Muslim dialogues, as Asad (2006) suggests, push tradition onto new terrain, addressing new projects, and developing new virtues, by identifying relevant bodies of knowledge and methods of knowledge transmission to ground and maintain Islamic tradition. This also pushes interlocutors to buttress their authority, rearticulating these bodies of knowledge in relation to the circumstances of the local context, as well as their own socio-political situated backgrounds and affiliations.

[Vital Narratives for Constructing Muslim Selves](#)

I began this thesis with student narratives and used them throughout to situate the development of intensive learning environments and contextualise the narrative work being done within them. These narratives served as a basis to build an understanding of content curated by teachers and the layers and dimensions of authority. They also enabled me to construct an image of the roads they traverse, the homes in which they live, the institutions

within their communities, and the social infrastructure that shapes them. These elements exist in a room walled with unique cultural tapestries, housed alongside two education systems which sit on streets in a socio-political society perpetually in flux.

For students in this study, the decade in which they experienced their formative development, unlike my own, was characterised by intense scrutiny – with their faith sitting under a microscope both in the national and international public domain due to geopolitical events. This scrutiny problematised their different identities, whereby their religious and national identities were considered as opposing entities. Whilst their early religious practice was informed by parental teachings, attending weekend faith schools, or self-direction, the personal narratives of Abdurazak, Manahil, Fatima, and Khaddijah demonstrate how the religious needs of their generation are beyond the teaching capacity of their parents. The embodied practices to which they have been oriented serve as a foundation to their understanding of obligatory ritual practice, yet fail to provide meaningful rationalisations for these behaviours and the larger religious ethic in which they reside. Thus, students embark on self-guided learning, identifying sources that can assist them in fashioning Muslim selves that can authentically dwell in their societies. As Allievi (2011) asserts, western Muslims looking to integrate and maintain their religious identity seek knowledge from modern scholars who understand religious tradition and western contexts. This rationale is seen in the student narratives presented. However, the imagined landscape of recorded pasts in which these students live is consistent in its discontinuity and this is exhibited in the ways students accept and reject narratives that construct boundaries of piety and ethics. In dialogue with one another, students and teachers continue developing Islamic tradition for an American Muslim landscape.

Much like the different interlocutors of religious texts in classical pedagogical sites, as discussed in Chapter 1, teachers inhabit the role of *'ulema'* given their structured classical training culminating in an *ijāza*, while others act as a *khaṭīb* delivering Friday sermons, or supplying devotional fear and inspirational stories, like a *wā'iẓ* (warner) or a *qāss* (storyteller). Additionally, activist and public intellectual roles come to the fore. Accordingly, Berkey's (2001) three defining characteristics of the tradition of popular preaching – storytelling, tensions between preaching and storytelling, and the link between preaching, storytelling, and Sufism, are present in the narratives presented here. However, the findings show that operationalising knowledge and providing a way for its relevancy in the life of a Muslims, are key characteristics as well. Teachers often take on many of the identified roles simultaneously. Furthermore, similar to conclusions drawn by Jones (2012) in her exploration of homiletic literature, the ethnographic lens showed how teachers maintain influence using rhetorical techniques, authoritative religious discourse and appealing to the emotions, aesthetics and rationality of their audience using narratives of self and place.

Multi-Layered View of Authority

The ethnographic chapters allow us to develop an understanding of the nature of knowledge, beyond discrete bodies of knowledge, the discrete, and its relationship to authority in these different learning environments. Knowledge and authority are inextricably tied to one another. Knowledge, particularly of the authoritative texts, is often seen as the main prism through which authority of religious teachers is understood. However, there are multiple ways in which religious teachers construct, develop, and maintain their authority. Earlier in this thesis, I

presented Campbell's (2007) approach to understanding authority online amongst religious communities, wherein she suggests that researchers should explore

religious hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognized religious or community leaders), religious structures (community structures, patterns of practice, or official organisations), religious ideology (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity) or religious texts (recognized teachings or official religious books such as the Koran, Torah, or Bible)(p. 1048).

Her multi-layered framework facilitates an analysis of online and offline spaces, which is apt given the transmedial learning structures which teachers and students traverse. Furthermore, it allows for a more nuanced view of the expressions of authority at play.

The roles teachers inhabit and the community perceptions of recognised religious or community leaders, contribute to students conferring legitimacy upon them to guide religious practice. It is not solely their roles within their communities and societies, but also the ability of teachers to establish a connection via knowledge of, or training by, teachers no longer living, and personalities with established authority. For some, this comes from teachers' recalibration of tradition that places them as direct inheritors of pre-modern Islam linked to the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, or the righteous generation of successors – primarily a direct appeal to a specific interpretation of the past. In other cases, the role is taken on through a relationship with influential modern-day philosophers, thinkers, and movement leaders. It is through borrowing power from these recognised leaders and a combination of their own personal histories that authority is exhibited. For others, their roles as activists speaking out on social justice issues, or as a public intellectual in the secular academy and on mainstream socio-political platforms, or as a mosque leader, further serve as a demonstration of their religious authority. Furthermore, the common practices such as Qur'ānic recitation, *dhikr*, reading

litanies, and overnight stays in the mosque, all combine to illustrate ways of maintaining tradition and developing collective memory. Each of these are performed in offline settings and are often reproduced online or on text-media communication applications.

Structures also play a large role in establishing and buttressing authority. Secular universities, established religious institutions such as mosques, shrines, tombs, universities, museums, and man-made sites imbued with Eastern aesthetics work to recalibrate tradition and maintain authority within the notion of tradition teachers seek to transmit. Organisations which create intensive learning environments are well-known within many Muslim communities, and students often learn about programmes through word of mouth, lectures they have previously attended, or suggestions from teachers online. Moreover, many students have been long inducted into a student-teacher-text mode of learning and are familiar with organisations which replicate this structure. Additionally, the Internet, which is far from a neutral setting, acts as a structure for the development and maintenance of authority, both synchronously and asynchronously, alongside intensive learning environments. Still, religious authority requires cultural relevancy to thrive, given student needs and the challenges they face in their everyday lives as youth. Teacher narratives reveal that authority is also stratified along socio-political structures, given past and present affiliations.

As it relates to ideology, teachers guide students using pedagogical practices that pivot around time, place, and location. Different regional locations and the community structures within them, on the one hand, link students to a religious history from one narrative of Muslim intellectual history and on the other, to American Muslim histories. The learning environments and its teachers recalibrate Islamic tradition with a focus on connections to the notion of a global

umma, past and present, while also advocating for local mooring. Chapter 5 demonstrates how the *Rihla* uses the history of two Turkish cities to ground students in a history of spiritual training and political power. The *ALIM* learning environment, presented in Chapter 7, deposes a zero-sum construct between perceived “western” and “Islamic” binaries using pedagogical sites such as museums and mosques to ground students in tradition while mooring them within the United States. Furthermore, a popular narrative of a ‘golden age’ of Islam or the utopia of *dar-ul-Islam* is invoked in *Rihla* to exemplify what one should aspire to, whilst in *ALIM* one teacher points to this narrative being problematic given its inability to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the histories of Muslim communities, and another considers the utopian narrative to be a myth and suggests students disabuse themselves of such assumptions. This demonstrates the contradictions of narratives that are characterised by essentialised representations of Islamic histories within the same tradition, which often circulate in various lectures delivered by teachers offline and online. In another vein, as teachers define who they are in relation to a global *umma*, they also define who they are not, disassociating themselves from violent Muslim groups who act in the name of Islam.

Although students in *RIS* and *Dream* learn in spaces without deep historical meaning, their narrative environments are constructed to make use of time and space for smaller encounters with teachers, whilst practising non-discursive components of tradition. Personal stories that teachers disclose to students supplement pre-established layers of authority by demonstrating elements of a shared identity. This often comes in the form of immigrant experiences, challenges operationalising knowledge from Islamic history, guidance from intellectuals of the past in a pluralistic society, or a desire to speak against social injustice.

However, when these narratives diverge from the realm of relatability, they serve to demonstrate the privileged nature of one who has acquired knowledge and continues to seek it, and thus, teachers are able to assert their authority given their educational qualifications.

Each of the learning environments also reveals that classical authoritative texts (the Qur'ān and Sunna), as well as known secondary texts and known works of literature, play a large role in the construction and maintenance of religious authority. Additionally, teachers affirm their authority by referencing a canon of classical texts, such as al-Ghazālī's literary works, Rumi's *Mathnawī*, Al-'Aqīdah aṭ-Ṭaḥāwīyya, *Madārij al-Sālikī*. In this way, teachers offer guidance extracted from these texts, to elucidate the revered nature of these erudite scholars and saints, from the generation of Muslim intellectuals two generations after Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, textual memory and the rhetorical devices used to demonstrate knowledge of the text further lend authority to teachers. Beyond guidance derived from the text, their dexterity with the language allows religious teachers to opt to use it as a performative element in their pedagogical approaches.

Challenges and Contradictions in Maintaining Authority

I have brought together a series of comparative case studies describing how teachers within a Sunni Islamic tradition mediate student encounters with tradition, define its contours by highlighting, revering, and amplifying specific narratives, whilst ignoring, omitting, and muting others. The revelation of contradictions between communicated messages in the learning environments and an organisation's commitment to transmedial learning attests to the ways mediators remain responsive to the expectations and demands of the laity in order to maintain their religious authority. For instance, programme staff's use of social media during *RIS* and *Rihla*

to provide images and quotes of teachers, and even the co-production of imagery using images of students' social media accounts, contradicts the guidance of some teachers to abandon the habitual practice of taking pictures and being constantly connected to the Internet. Furthermore, the willingness of teachers to pose for selfies further complicates any coherent understanding of what a devotional yet practical engagement with technology entails. Students are socialised to be authority-dependent but contest authority in various ways, as demonstrated in previous chapters. Moreover, some teachers are unable to continuously produce an idea of humility and distance from the self-promoting nature of selfies given student demands. Others reject the wholesale adoption of technology-use practices or either have an online presence they control or none at all. Whereas some teachers submit to pictures being taken by online moderators for institutional images, others are uncomfortable with cameras in the classroom, as demonstrated in the case of *ALIM*. Further paradoxes persist when religious teachers address the overall pursuit of knowledge. In some cases, teachers congratulate students on their commitment to seek religious knowledge, and note the high status which this endeavour entails, and further communicate that others envy them. In the next breath, they are cautioning against seeing the accumulation of knowledge as an end, or a source of privilege. However, it is the demonstration of the breadth and depth of teachers' knowledge that creates a distance between students and teachers. This reveals that not only a shared-identity characterised by similar experiences, but dissimilar experiences, show a reliance on another level of identity construction -- the assumption of roles from shared understanding of one's position in the process of knowledge transmission and acquisition within established teacher-student learning structures.

The ethnographic lens also presents the ways in which gendered spatial segregation differs across each of the sites and is only ostensibly maintained in the classroom setting. The placement of men and women side by side with or without a barrier shows how the programmes' configuration disrupts or maintains pre-existing notions of gender-segregation in Sunni traditions. In the case of Chapter 7, it is stated that this is seen as a move towards gender parity, despite the existence of a solid, opaque barrier. However, in the other environments we see a large degree of ambivalence regarding spatiality (Chapters 4 and 6), or the absence of any spatial segregation outside of the classroom, as seen in Chapter 5.

Student and teacher narratives also reveal incongruities along gender lines. In the case of Manahil, her search for knowledge has aims related to gender equality, as well as a degree of deliverance from the stereotypes perpetuated by the media about Muslim women. Yet her goal comes across as totalising, like that of the media, instead of advocating for a myriad understanding of Muslim women across the globe. On the other hand, Mattson's narrative acknowledges a freedom of movement, access to which Muslim women in different parts of the world may not have had. However, the numbered presence of Muslim women in each of the learning environments attest to the ways in which many women no longer subscribe to these traditional views. Accordingly, we come to see education as gendered and the doctrinal positions the programmes take are silent on the permissibility of women travelling without a male guardian – often considered to be prohibited within Sunni orthodoxy. Furthermore, men are in positions of authority and their student base is largely women, *ALIM* being an exception within this study. The substantial presence of women and the acknowledgement by some teachers and programme staff that if it were not for maintaining gender balance, the programmes would cater

to a female only audience, forces a reflection on the motivations of and outcomes for women seeking knowledge. Women seek knowledge primarily for personal reasons, as openings on the elite speaking circuit are few: except for the current proliferation of youth director-type mosque positions for women, there are few leadership positions.

Developing Future Pasts

Talal Asad draws on the work of various social theorists, such as Foucault and MacIntyre, to argue for a study of the lived nature of Islamic tradition. Asad's (1986) suggestion for exploring Islam as an object of anthropological understanding argues for a consideration of tradition in a way "that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges" (p. 10). As stated in the beginning of this thesis, knowledge acquisition is a defining element of the development of a Muslim identity. The education of American Muslims, as anchored in these learning environments, is a process of reconfiguration of Islamic tradition using narratives of time and place for a fashioning of a Muslim self that weaves a distinct thread within the American socio-political landscape. These learning environments are a vehicle by which tradition reconceptualises and communicates new stories for future pasts – ways to readapt classical narratives to live in the future. The use of Asad's (1986) discursive lens of the Islamic tradition as "a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present" (p. 21), allows for the illumination of the relational aspect of authority, connected to the dynamics between teachers and the communities that confer legitimacy upon them. Authoritative licence to create linkages between past, present, and future is developed, projected, and maintained through a dialogue

between the sacred and profane, not just the sacred – despite the ‘Islamic’ descriptor. Teachers acquire authority from several elements and places in order to enable them to effectively link a past to an imagined future, drawing the boundaries for legitimate orthodox Sunni Muslim practice.

As Asad (1986) has stated, “the process of trying to win someone over for the willing performance of a traditional practice... is a necessary part of Islamic discursive traditions” (p. 23). Teachers present themselves in ways that appeal to the histories they identify in their pedagogical sites and create a sense of place that again aligns with the areas of the sacred and profane that they specifically select. Nonetheless, the notion of dialogue goes beyond the verbal. Each of the layers from which authority is drawn and exhibited intersect at various points to establish authority within a specific environment. The multi-layered view illustrates how they all work together. This shows that there is no one combination that guarantees authority, especially given the various educational needs and backgrounds of students. What might work for some may not work for all, further attesting to the role of the charismatic and highlighting that authority is continuously being negotiated. However, while authority is unequal and unstable, men with cultural and experiential knowledge, as well as dexterity with the Arabic language, garner the largest audiences. In this sense, rupture and accommodation are shown to be inherent characteristics of a discursive tradition.

Twenty years after his initial articulation of a discursive tradition, Asad (2017) returns to his writings on the subject, wherein he emphasises disagreement as playing a key role within tradition.

It is that arguments about what it means to be a Muslim (when they do occur, and whether, when they occur, they invoke “authorities” or not) are oriented towards a coherent understanding or appreciation of a divine revelation and of the role of the messenger who made it available to mankind (p. 200).

These four case studies have revealed many moments of difference between them, and often from within, in developing understandings of what it means to be a Muslim. They maintain degrees of similarities in using discrete knowledge, experiential knowledge, educational qualifications, texts, language, oratory skill, ethnicity/race, dress, and gender in this process. Intensive learning environments, one component of the transmedial experience, demonstrate how time unfolds with the recalibration of tradition through disagreement.

RIS and *Rihla* take an archaeological approach (Glaude, 2007) in reconfiguring tradition to disinter a lost Muslim identity that draws from knowledge of transmitted and rational sciences, as well as literary, artistic, musical, and sartorial traditions of the historical East. In some instances, not within the framework of the programme itself but the rhetoric of teachers, there are disruptions along this line of development and movement appears towards a pragmatic approach (Glaude, 2007). As exhibited in *ALIM*, this pragmatic approach, which I will term ‘historicised-pragmatism’, does not focus on the excavation of gems from history. Instead, teachers reconfigure tradition by combining knowledge of transmitted and rational sciences with specific historical narratives from United States history. In this way, teachers develop identities that are a by-product of who Muslims take themselves to be considering the challenges they face against the narratives of these histories. In *Dream*, however, a combination of the two is employed, wherein pragmatism gives licence to an excavation project that places transmitted science at its centre. Situated in a context of autodidacticism, self-learning of Arabic language is

used as a tool for discovery of Quranic guidance. However, the deviation from existing traditional structures for teaching and learning demonstrates how maintenance of tradition is disrupted and pushed into new terrain.

The focus on intensive learning environments elucidates the new terrain that Asad speaks of. Even as Meyrowitz (1985) asserts the sense of place and the intimacy one seeks to engender for dialogical discussion is disrupted when technology is introduced, I argue that it also simultaneously cultivates a need for place and provides value for face-to-face encounters. Just as the Internet has facilitated the proliferation of voices speaking on behalf of Islam – seeking to reconfigure tradition according to viewpoints and socio-political positioning of these voices, necessitating the presence of legitimate figures to make sense of the noise, so too has the burgeoning use of technology created a need for the confined intimacy of intensive learning environments. Thus, taking advantage of the transmedial spatial configuration[s] enables teachers to create spaces for transmitting knowledge to a wide range of audiences. Intensive learning environments cultivate the development of a privileged student elite, new terrain outside of the learned elite and dedicated students on a path of religious scholarship. These students have access to more structured and cogent knowledge and focused time with teachers, unlike the general public.

This thesis provides a vivid illustration of what it means to continue developing a discursive tradition. It could well be argued that Islam and Muslims, especially in relation to the *umma* presence in Muslim-minority countries, have never faced such pressure and scrutiny, both from within and without. Many of today's generation of young Muslims grow up with a need to develop their faith identity in a way that is relevant to their contemporary situation while

searching for an anchor to the collective tradition to which they belong. Their search for religious knowledge enables teachers to create and maintain their authority, given the symbiotic nature of the relationship. The teachers they look to for this knowledge adhere to classical bodies of knowledge in various ways and use rhetorical devices and structures to construct authority for students to confer legitimacy upon teachers. As teachers continue to assert their interpretative positions to recalibrate Islamic tradition within the American landscape, they must acquire knowledge and skills that carry influence amongst potential supporters and provide spaces to access curated bodies of knowledge.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, Islamic Sunni tradition isn't static. It is constantly under reconstruction and formal encounters with it are subject to the sensibilities and commitments of teachers who mediate it within the celebrity American culture in which they reside. The analysis presented here demonstrates the ways religious teachers in a western context, engage in intra-Muslim dialogues by offering new temporary settings for the deployment of different emplotment strategies using hierarchies, structures, ideologies, and texts, to ensure the stability of Islamic tradition in the American Muslim landscape. These temporary settings allow a learned elite to offer structured and cogent guidance using knowledge of the rules as they relate to the faith and the exemplary practices of Prophet Muhammad and his successors, but also selected regional histories.

The reshaping of tradition as presented in these chapters brings the issue of time and place to the fore of the discussion, illustrating how [collective] memory and associated sociohistorical narratives contribute to the development of individual and collective narratives in temporary learning environments, buttressed by online spaces. The process of maintaining

tradition has always been a constructive process carried out by teachers with attention to the knowledge aspirations and sensibilities of students. In the United States, religious teachers ground students physically, intellectually, and psychologically, within an articulation of Sunni Islamic tradition that offers a way for students to orient themselves to living in a pluralistic society. Online spaces have played a key role in this process, enabling teachers to expand their audience base and give students access to their guidance on multiple platforms. Along with this knowledge-seeking level of Muslim communities, teachers continue to acquire skills and knowledge that carry influence amongst students, attentive to spaces students traverse, as well as providing spaces for them to have access to their interpretative positions which reconfigure Islamic tradition within the American landscape.

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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

<i>‘Ālim/‘ālima</i>	learned person (man/woman)
<i>Alḥamdulillāh</i>	phrase: Praise God
<i>Aqīda</i>	basic creed
<i>Āyah</i>	verse in the Qur’ān
<i>Bashariyya</i>	human
<i>Dīn</i>	religion – often used to refer to Islam as a way of life
<i>Dhikr</i>	remembrance/recollection
<i>Dhikr-ul-Allah</i>	remembrance of God
<i>Dua’</i>	supplication
<i>Fiṭra</i>	natural disposition - the qualities installed in one by God and it’s something that all humans share not a gift for a particular person.
<i>Fiqh</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Hadith</i>	records of sayings of Prophet Muhammad
<i>Halal</i>	permitted by law
<i>Ḥalaqa</i>	study circles
<i>Haram</i>	prohibited by law
<i>Hifz/hifdh</i>	Qur’ānic memorisation
<i>‘Ilm</i>	knowledge
<i>Imān</i>	faith
<i>Ijāza</i>	teaching license
<i>Istighfār</i>	seeking forgiveness
<i>Jāhilī</i>	pre-Islamic
<i>Khaṭīb,</i>	man who delivers the Friday sermon
<i>Khulafā’</i>	caliphs
<i>Khutbah</i>	Friday sermon
<i>Kufi</i>	skullcap
<i>Kuttāb</i>	a place for writing
<i>Madrasa</i>	place of learning or school
<i>Mu’addib</i>	one who teaches proper comportment
<i>Mu‘allim</i>	teacher

<i>Madhhab</i>	one of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Misbahah</i>	rosary like beads used for <i>dhikr</i>
<i>Muftis</i>	legal expert able to provide rulings
<i>Murrabbī</i>	guide or teacher who raises another
<i>MāshāʾAllāh</i>	phrase: literally – God has willed (used to express appreciation)
<i>Jalabiyya</i>	long gown
<i>Jannah</i>	paradise
<i>Qāḍīs</i>	judges
<i>Qiyām-ul-layl</i>	standing at night (refers to prayer done in the middle of the night)
<i>Raḥma</i>	mercy
<i>Rihla</i>	trip or journey
<i>Ṣaḥāba</i>	companions of Prophet Muhammad
<i>Salla Allāh ʿalayhi wa-sallam</i>	peace be upon him
<i>Shabāb</i>	young men
<i>Sīra</i>	biography of Prophet Muhammad
<i>Subḥānallāh</i>	phrase: Glory be to God
<i>Sūra</i>	chapter in the Qurʾān
<i>Tabaqāt</i>	biographical literature of the scholars
<i>Ṭālib-ul-ʿilm</i>	student of knowledge
<i>Tarbiya</i>	character development
<i>Taʿlīm</i>	instruction in a subject
<i>Taṣawwuf</i>	Sufism
<i>Tafsīr</i>	exegesis
<i>Tawfīq</i>	success
<i>ʿUlemaʾ</i>	religiously learned scholars
<i>Umma</i>	global community
<i>Ustādh</i>	teacher (used as a title)
<i>Wallāhī</i>	phrase: I swear by God
<i>wallāhu ʿalam</i>	phrase: And God knows best
<i>Zakat</i>	alms

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Approval CUREC Zainab Kabba

Page 1 of 1

Approval CUREC Zainab Kabba

Catherine Walter

Sent: 17 May 2013 00:15

To: Zainab Kabba

Cc: Nigel Fancourt; Education Research Office

Attachments: CUREC1A_Sept2012_TOS_kabba2.docx (44 KB) ; 1. Appendix I - Learning ~1.docx (27 KB) ; 2. Appendix II - Letter o~1.docx (19 KB) ; 3. Appendix III - Informa~1.docx (54 KB) ; 4. Appendix IV - Question~1.docx (42 KB) ; 5. Appendix V - Focus Gro~1.docx (24 KB) ; 6. Appendix VI - Student ~1.docx (28 KB) ; 7. Appendix VII - Teacher~1.docx (23 KB) ; 8. Appendix VIII - Inform~1.docx (54 KB)

Dear Zainab,

Application Approval

Title: *The Education of Young American Muslims: Religious Knowledge and Authority in Institutions of Islamic Learning*

The above application, as per the attached documents, has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/research/questions/reporting_child_abuse_wda74908.html

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Walter

Member of DREC

Dr Catherine Walter

University Lecturer in Applied Linguistics
Fellow of Linacre College
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Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching English Language in University Settings:
<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/courses/pgdip-telus/>

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT SHEET

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Supervisors: Dr. Nigel Fancourt and Dr. David Mills

Administrator: Kay Ashmore

Researcher: Zainab Kabba



The Education of Young American Muslims: Religious Knowledge and Authority in Institutions of Islamic Learning INFORMATION SHEET

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study explores the educational experiences of a range of young Muslims and the ways in which they use contact with religious knowledge and scholars as a way of understanding what it means to be Muslim living in a secular society.

CONSENT

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research study, you may withdraw at any time. You will not be penalized if you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All collected information will be stored on a password-protected computer. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. Your responses during this process will remain confidential and a false name will be used to identify anything disclosed, unless you choose to allow your name to be disclosed. Discussions will be audio-recorded and any paper tasks will not be used to identify you unless you choose to disclose your name. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes (written thesis, journal articles, conference presentations, etc.). Any ~~un~~anonymised data will be stored for the duration of the project, while it has academic value, up to seven years maximum. Anonymised data will be kept indefinitely, for academic use.

CONTACT

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please contact Zainab Kabba at zainab.kabba@education.ox.ac.uk. If you remain unhappy and wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; +44 (0)1865 614871; Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee, Oxford University, Hayes House, 75 George Street, Oxford, OX12BQ, UK.

PLEASE CHECK THE BELOW TO INDICATE YOU UNDERSTAND THE DETAILS OF THE STUDY:

- I have read the above information about the study.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study without penalty at any time.
- I understand that this project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.
- I voluntarily agree to participate.
- I understand to whom to raise a concern and make a complaint.
- I am at least 18 years of age.
- I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored; and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.
- I understand how the research data will be used.

Signature _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE
Islamic Knowledge and Authority Research Project

PAST -- EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE				
What type of school did you go to for...?				
	PUBLIC	PRIVATE	HOME SCHOOL	OTHER _____
Elementary school (K-5/6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Junior high/middle school (6-8/9)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
High school (9-12)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Did you attend Islamic weekend school when you were young?		NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	HOW LONG? _____
Did you attend an Islamic after-school program when you were young?		NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	HOW LONG? _____
Have you traveled overseas to seek Islamic knowledge?		NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	WHERE? _____ HOW LONG? _____
Have you previously attended Islamic courses/classes?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Please list course and location.</i>	

CURRENT ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE			
Which of the following sources do you use to acquire Islamic knowledge? (<i>Please specify websites or fb pages</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/> Facebook <input type="checkbox"/> YouTube <input type="checkbox"/> Websites (specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Books	<input type="checkbox"/> Conferences/Lectures (in person) <input type="checkbox"/> CDs/Tapes <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)	
In which language do you access Islamic resources (such as lectures and books)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> English Other _____		
Why did you choose to attend this program?			
Do you think ordinary Muslims (who have not studied Islam formally) should study the Qur'an and hadith books by themselves?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think ordinary Muslims (who have not studied Islam formally) should study the books of classical scholars themselves?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think as you gain more Islamic knowledge you will be able to engage in the interpretation of Islamic sources?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think as you gain more Islamic knowledge you will be able to take independent Islamic decisions over matters concerning your life?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

Name **five** living Muslim individuals or scholars you seek knowledge from or are of benefit to you in your life.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. _____
5. _____

Name **five** Muslim scholars of the past (no longer living) from whose work you benefit.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. _____
5. _____

PERSONAL PRACTICE

Do you fast during Ramadan?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you go to taraweh prayers during Ramadan?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you regularly wear hijab?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you consider yourself a practicing Muslim?	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

What does this, practicing, mean to you?

How often do you pray?	ALWAYS <input type="checkbox"/>	VERY FREQUENTLY <input type="checkbox"/>	OCCASIONALLY <input type="checkbox"/>	RARELY <input type="checkbox"/>	NEVER <input type="checkbox"/>	NO RESPONSE – N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
------------------------	---------------------------------	--	---------------------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------------	--

PERSONAL OPINION

How important is knowledge of Arabic necessary to understanding how to live your life as a Muslim?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very important <input type="checkbox"/> Important <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately important	<input type="checkbox"/> Of little importance <input type="checkbox"/> Not important <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A
How much knowledge of Arabic?	<input type="checkbox"/> Elementary (basic terminology) <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate (understand many Arabic words and grammar) <input type="checkbox"/> Proficient (read and understand well)	<input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
How similar is your understanding of Islam to that of your parents?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very similar <input type="checkbox"/> Similar <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately similar	<input type="checkbox"/> Slightly similar <input type="checkbox"/> Not similar <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A
How similar is your practice of Islam to that of your parents?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very similar <input type="checkbox"/> Similar <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately similar	<input type="checkbox"/> Slightly similar <input type="checkbox"/> Not similar <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A
How much do you feel you are part of a global ummah?	<input type="checkbox"/> A great deal <input type="checkbox"/> A lot <input type="checkbox"/> A moderate amount	<input type="checkbox"/> A little <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A
What does 'ummah' mean to you?		
What issues are important for you to support within the ummah?		
COMMUNITY WORK		NONE
For what cause(s) have you attended a rally?		<input type="checkbox"/>
In which political parties are you an active member?		<input type="checkbox"/>
What organization are you involved in which help the poor, sick, elderly, homeless, or other disadvantaged populations?		<input type="checkbox"/>
In what neighborhood, civic, or community group are you involved?		<input type="checkbox"/>
In what local or national elections have you voted?		<input type="checkbox"/>

CIVIC OPINIONS

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response N/A
Muslims should study Islam in order to be able to get involved and make positive changes in society.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Muslims should study Islam in order to initiate political and social reforms.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The more Islamic knowledge I acquire the more I want to isolate myself from mainstream non-Muslim society.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The more knowledge I acquire of the religion the more I want to move to a Muslim-majority country.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Islam encourages me to be involved in making life better for non-Muslims in my community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Islam encourages me to be involved in making life better for Muslims in my community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DEMOGRAPHICS

1	Permanent Residence	City: _____ State/Province: _____		
2	Race/Ethnicity	<input type="checkbox"/> African (<i>specify: _____</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Arab (<i>specify: _____</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Asian (<i>specify: _____</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> European (<i>specify: _____</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed race <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific (<i>specify: _____</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	
3	Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male		
4	Place of Birth	Country: _____ City: _____ State/Province: _____		
5	How long have you been living in America/Canada/____?	_____ yrs	<input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE N/A	
6	Marital Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/> Engaged	<input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/> Widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
7	Age	_____		
8	Do you have children?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A		
9	Living Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Alone <input type="checkbox"/> With parents/family <input type="checkbox"/> With spouse <input type="checkbox"/> With roommates <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
10	Highest level of education	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school <input type="checkbox"/> High School <input type="checkbox"/> Some College <input type="checkbox"/> Associates <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors <input type="checkbox"/> Masters <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
11	What is your work type?	<input type="checkbox"/> Part-time <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/> Per diem/freelance <input type="checkbox"/> Student only <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
12	Are your parents Muslim?	Parent 1 <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A	Parent 2 <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A	
13	Did you convert/revert to Islam?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO RESPONSE/ N/A		
14	How long have you been Muslim?	_____		

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

This is focus group schedule that includes questions asked to students. Focus groups were conducted at the mid-way point within each program, with both gendered and mix gendered groups where possible. Questions were generated from early literature reviews, responses from administered questionnaires, as well as participant observation. Given the nature of focus group discussions, free flowing conversations prevented groups from answering the same questions.

Introduction

1. Please state your name, where you are from, and why you chose to attend the program?
2. How did you hear about the program?

Life Practice

1. Are there any challenges that you face living as Muslims in America?
2. Are there any challenges that are specific to men or women?

Knowledge

1. What does Islamic knowledge mean to you?
2. When you hear the words 'sacred knowledge' what comes to mind?
3. When you hear the words 'Islamic tradition' what comes to mind?
4. What sources do you use to obtain knowledge about Islam?
5. What do you hope you will be able to do with what you have learned here?
6. Is it important for a scholar to go overseas in order to be knowledgeable about Islam?
7. Do you know what an ijaza is? Do you think it is important for a scholar to have one in order to teach?
8. What is the role of Arabic in learning?
9. What role does technology/media play in your process of seeking knowledge?

Religious Authorities

1. Which teacher as resonated with you the most? Why?
2. What characteristics to they embody that makes you feel like this person is a legitimate person that I should accept my Islam from?
3. Is there a lack of female scholars?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (STUDENTS)

This is an interview schedule that includes questions asked to students in each of the field-sites. It should be noted that all interviewees were not asked the same questions nor in any consistent order, other than background questions, which began the conversation.

Background

1. Can you tell me a bit about your childhood? – Family? Community?
2. Can you tell me about the religious orientation (and education) of your family?
3. What types of religious learning schools/programmes/centers did you attend? How long?
4. How have your parents shaped your views on Islam?

Institution

1. Is this the first time you have attended an intensive program?
2. What do you feel is the role of programmes like these?
3. How did you hear about it?
4. What factors determine if you will participate in such a program?
5. What do you hope to get out of this program?
6. What do you hope students will get out of their time here?
7. If you did not attend this program what would you have done in its place, if anything?

Knowledge

1. What does Islamic knowledge mean to you? What does it do for your life?
2. Have you gone overseas to seek knowledge? Where?
3. Can you conceive of what you would have done in place of not coming here?
4. Why is learning about these things important to you?
 - a. What will you do with this knowledge after the program?
5. What sources do you use to obtain knowledge about Islam?
6. What role does technology/media play in your process of seeking and distributing knowledge?
7. What do you believe is the role of Islamic knowledge in the life of a Muslim in America?
8. What is the role of memorization in the learning process?
9. What do you see is your role as an Islamic scholar or intellectual in America?
10. Do you believe there is a locus for Islam knowledge production? Where?
11. Do you have teachers that you refer to or do you operate autonomously based on your skills as a scholar?

America and Religious Authorities

1. How would you characterize the situation of Muslim communities in America?
2. Do you feel that the experiences in America are unique to Muslims in other places?
3. Are there any challenges you feel you face as an American Muslim? What do you feel is the most challenging thing?
4. Are there issues you face in a modern society that you feel you need help in dealing? What? Who helps you? Do you think your peers do the same?
5. What do you think are some of the characteristics or skills someone needs in order to help you and your peers in dealing with these challenges?
6. Do you think having a degree from an Islamic university in the US is important for a scholar to be qualified to deal with your challenges? Is it sufficient?
7. Do you think having an ijaza is important for a scholar to be qualified to interpret the text to help Muslims deal with perceived challenges in America?

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (TEACHERS)

This is an interview schedule that includes questions asked to teachers and select staff members in each of the field-sites. It should be noted that all interviewees were not asked the same questions nor in any consistent order, other than background questions, which began the conversation.

Background

1. Can you tell me a bit about your childhood? – Family? Community?
2. Can you tell me about the religious orientation (and education) of your family?
3. What types of educational institutions did you attend?
4. How have your parents shaped your views on Islam (or influenced you accepting Islam)?

Institution

1. What do you feel is the role of programmes like these?
2. What factors determine if you will participate in such a program?
3. What do you hope students will get out of their time here?

Muslims in America

1. How would you characterize the situation of Muslim communities in America?
2. Do you have teachers that you refer to or do you operate autonomously based on your skills as a scholar?
3. Do you think having an ijaza is important for a scholar to be qualified to interpret the text to help Muslims deal with perceived challenges in America?
4. What do you see is your role as an Islamic scholar or intellectual in America?

Knowledge

1. What do you believe is the role of Islamic knowledge in the life of a Muslim in America?
2. Do you believe there is a locus for Islam knowledge production? Where?
3. What role does technology/media play in production or distribution of knowledge?